

Notes After Class: A Teachers' Reflective Article About Working In Private And Public Scenarios

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Abstract

This reflective article is the result of the compilation of teachers' narratives of their experiences while working in different stages of their careers in both public and private institutions. It is a qualitative study that uses grounded theory analysis to deep into the concerns and challenges they have faced while developing their teaching activities, and encourages discussion regarding stereotypes that pre-service teachers and teachers in general have internalized about public and private contexts. The data was gathered through written narratives and informal interviews with student-teachers while finishing their master's degree in Language Teaching. The authors conclude that motivation -for both students and teachers- is an important factor for the success of the class, and that its procurance comes from multiple factors that can be associated with the type of institution where the teaching is developed.

Keywords: public and private education, teachers' narratives, reflection on action, stereotypes.

Resumen

Este artículo reflexivo es el resultado de la recopilación de narrativas de docentes sobre sus experiencias mientras trabajaron en diferentes etapas de sus carreras en instituciones públicas y privadas. Se trata de un estudio cualitativo que utiliza el análisis de la teoría fundamentada para profundizar en las preocupaciones y desafíos que han enfrentado durante el desarrollo de su actividad docente, y fomenta la discusión sobre los estereotipos que los futuros docentes y los docentes en general han internalizado sobre los contextos públicos y privados. Los datos se recopilaron a través de narrativas escritas y entrevistas informales con estudiantes de profesorado mientras finalizaban su maestría en Enseñanza de Idiomas. Los autores concluyen que la motivación -tanto de estudiantes como de profesores- es un factor importante para el éxito de la clase, y que su obtención proviene de múltiples factores que pueden asociarse al tipo de institución donde se desarrolla la enseñanza.

Introduction

Public and private education. Two distant places and conditions, or at least it is what a lot of people think. It is generally believed that private education is always related to the fact of having money, an easy life and a lot of resources. On the other hand, public education is generally perceived as a scenario full of limitations and presenting difficult conditions to study in, although it is also assumed that students from public scenarios are more intelligent than those who are immersed in private institutions. But is all of it truth or it is only a stereotype?

Evidently, public and private education are very different but it does not mean that one is better than the other or that one has more value than the other. Sometimes negative stereotypes have the power to determine the perspective that a big group of people has in relation to a particular topic or scenario, as it happens in the case of types of educative institutions, which generates many negative consequences and misunderstandings that can affect directly the life of the people who are in any of the two positions. However, it is undeniable that there is a lot to analyze and to contrast between the public and private systems of education. That is the reason why the current article will explore the experiences and perspectives from 3 different teachers in their pedagogical practices and works in both private and public institutions. Their life lessons and experiences will be contrasted in order to obtain important conclusions about how both scenarios in education are perceived, specially from the teachers' perspectives.

Theoretical framework

Private education

In Colombia as in many other countries of the world, education has its origins in catholic religion.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, highlighting as a relevant fact at the educational level the emergence of universities, which in their beginnings are originated by the religious communities that were present in the country, such as the Dominican fathers and the Jesuits (Melo, 2017) who arrived on the continent during the period of the Spanish conquest in the period of 1519 and 1551, with the specific mission of spreading

Christianity through the evangelization of New Spain “who, as bearers of the Gospel, overcame all obstacles in order to achieve the implantation of the faith” (Patiño, 2002, p. 12). (Perez, 2019)

In the same way, the first school in Colombia was “Colegio Mayor de San Bartolome” in Bogota, the capital of the country. It was founded in the year of 1604 and as it can be inferred from the name of the institution, it was and still is a Catholic school. Even when many years have passed, most of the private institutions in Colombia still have a catholic approach. However, religion is not the only reason why private institutions appeared. According to Garcia (2011) there were three important factors which motivated the existence of private education in Colombia:

“1. The importance of historic tradition in Europe and America, which for centuries held the educative practice under the protection of patriarchal family, both in low and high social classes. 2. The need to maintain a status and a social distance with members of a different social class. 3 the unconscious fears related to the separation of the children, the control over them and the social contagion”.

Based on the previous quote, it is possible to understand one of the common stereotypes that people hold about private education. Sadly, our history as the one of many other countries has been marked by classism and social rejection. From the education received in the family many children were and still are formed to remember that having money makes a difference and that it is important to remind people who are not in the same social status that difference. Beyond looking for quality education many families only tried to have their children in a different place from the “poor” kids. That separation was the first motivation to start creating new spaces in which people with enough money could send their kids without the worrying of them being “infected” by the other kids.

“From the very beginning of the Republic, the education offered by particular people strengthen because of the requests of the wealthy parents. The particular teachers, whose practices were known since the Colony, kept current during the Republic epoch, teaching in family houses or in their own houses”. (Garcia, 2011).

Those particular teachers can be considered as the main origin of private institutions, places were wealthy and low income kids could not be mixed

by any means. For that reason, the “private houses of education” became more and more popular for those parents who were able to pay for their kids’ education and who wanted to offer them a different kind of instruction.

Since the creation of private institutions, they have increased their popularity. Nowadays, there are plenty of private institutions in Colombia which answer to different needs of the population of this context. According to Colombia Estudia (2023), in our country there are approximately 155 private universities, which are located in different cities, but specially in the capital, Bogota. From that number it is possible to infer that, due to the big number of private institutions, they offer different options related to price and approach for many young people who want to become professionals. Even when the historic context of this kind of education has been related to social class and discrimination in the past, it is important to highlight that nowadays private education is a source of choice for people. These institutions have different approaches which could be more suitable according to ideologies and philosophies that population may praise in their lives.

Additionally, private schools and universities include in their offer several advantages which make the difference between them and other institutions. This is the case of Hotschkiss (2023) that includes the following advantages of studying in a private school, in their website: “1. Parental involvement 2. Safe learning environment 3. Strong sense of community 4. Individualized attention from teachers 5. Increased Access to Co-Curricular Opportunities 6. Tuition Assistance and Grants and 7. Higher Academic Standards”.

On balance, it is possible to say that private education offers options to people. In these kind of institutions people may find different alternatives if they are trying to study in a very specific environment, if they aim to be in an institution which shares their philosophical or religious perspective or if they are looking for a very personalized worldview. Private education is doubtlessly a very important aspect in Colombian scenario and thanks to these institutions there are hundreds of professionals who can help in the process of improving the country’s conditions.

Public education

As it has been mentioned, education in Colombia started being a privilege, only the wealthy people had the chance to be educated. Having the

chance to be instructed no matter the social condition or the amount of money people had was not an easy process. According to Patiño (2014):

In the nineteenth century was organized, by Francisco de Paula Santander, the system of public schools; Reading, writing, arithmetic, and Christian morals were taught, educational laws were issued, and curricula were drafted. In the government of Mariano Ospina Rodríguez, through the Code of Public Instruction (1844), the State was allowed to intervene in education and humanistic and technical training was given. With the radical reform, which was called Peace, roads and school, in 1870 the National Directorate of Public Instruction was created. The teaching of morality was introduced, an administrative organization was given, new teaching methods emerged, and there was a great proliferation of schools, with new constructions.

Based on that, many years had to pass in order for the *common people* –those who belonged to the low class- to have the chance to study. In the year of 1822 the first public and official school of Colombia was opened. It is “Colegio de Boyacá”. From this year, several public institutions were inaugurated and it meant a change in the perception of the people about the education and about studying. Other important problem that education had to face was that, due to the centralization of the government, only the people who were in the capital or in the center of the country had access to education. Then,

“In 1835, under the mandate of the President of the Republic General Francisco de Paula Santander and the Minister of Education José Ignacio de Márquez; education was promoted as an indispensable tool for the Colombian people, therefore, it was necessary to create educational establishments in different regions of the country and mainly in rural areas such as: Mompòx, Cartagena de Indias, Tunja and Popayán. Since, they were considered sites of high rates of illiteracy and school dropout.”
(Robles, 2016)

Public education appeared as an answer to inequality, to provide people from all the regions of the Country with the possibility to access knowledge. It was a long and difficult path, nonetheless, there are hundreds of people who are able to study and become professionals nowadays due to it, no matter their social position or the region of the country where they are located.

Public education has been a fundamental part of the development and conditions in Colombia. According to Borjas and Acosta (2000) “In 1997, Colombia had 85 thousand educational establishments, 390 thousand teachers, and 8.6 million students. In addition, public school teachers and educational staff comprise the highest percentage of public sector employment”. Based on this historical data, it is possible to evidence how public sector has not only been important for the students, but also for the teachers and other professionals who work in this field and whose families depend on it. Public sector in education is one of the biggest branches of public institutions. These schools are in charge of educating millions of Colombians and in this way, they have a huge responsibility in the process of building this country.

However, public education has also passed through difficult and painful processes. First of all, due to the constant violent scenario that Colombia has faced, education was and sometimes is still used as an ideological weapon. The unfair conditions that the country has gone through in terms of inequality and injustice, promoted the creation of ideological groups that sometimes from public universities tried to get people to join their cause and fight against the government. It has generated a terrible violence spiral that according to what was discovered by *Comision de la Verdad* has left 588 dead students between the years 1962 and 2011 in Colombia.

Based on that, all the different perspectives that could appear as a result of free thinking in universities was stigmatized:

“The coexistence between legal and illegal organizations within university settings was also used to stigmatize all forms of student activism. Narratives were constructed in which the political and union action of these sectors was presented as an expression of a “civil insurgency” that the Military Forces faced as if it were their enemy in an internal war, these attacks generated serious effects on human rights in university environments”. (*Comision de la Verdad, 2023*)

Many innocent students were judged for being part of any kind of organization, even when it was not illegal or it did not have any insurgence purpose. Due to the use of public universities to conscript people for armed groups, these institutions acquired very negative connotations and a lot of unfair violence was experienced there.

The lack of resources has also affected in a deep and important way the quality and the development of public education. The facilities and the resources of the institutions sometimes are not enough to cover the needs from all the students and it causes a decrease in the quality of the education offered. Additionally, the difficult social conditions of the country have generated a big number of school dropout processes in the case of students who are forced to work or do different activities in order to economically support their families or try to get better life conditions.

To sum up, even when public education in Colombia has been marked by several problems and shortcomings, it is still one of the most accessible options for the people in order to study and become professionals. Public education has offered for years a possibility to study and understand the world in a critic and holistic way, which aims at forming conscious and reflective professionals who will be determinant to improve the conditions of this country.

Methodology

The current study has been done under the light of qualitative approach taking into account the style of the data and the way in which it has been gathered. As it was stated by Hollstein (2011) “When we speak of qualitative methods, we are referring to a heterogeneous research landscape, which, due to its variety, is difficult to comprehensively account for”. According to that it is possible to see how wide and diverse is the field of education and how diverse the opinions about it might be.

This study was developed with three participants, 3 teachers who have had the chance to work in public and private scenarios in different stages of their careers. Their opinions and perspectives were analyzed through their narratives, and interviews, where they talk about their experiences in both public and private institutions. These data were analyzed by using grounded theory and as a result of it certain categories have emerged. In the following paragraphs those categories and its analysis will be presented and explained in detail.

Data analysis and discussion

From the analysis of the data, conducted under the light of grounded theory, it was possible to see that after a process of coding in which the written narratives were contrasted, 3 main categories emerged that reflected commonalities among the teachers' reflections. Those are: more than students they are real people, what about teachers? and organizing the educative practice. These categories will be explained in a detailed way in the coming paragraphs.

More than students they are real people

One of the biggest problems that education has had during history has been the idea of imagining a homogeneous group of beings who think, understand and see everything in the same way whenever we refer to the students. However, reality is pretty different from that. No matter the institution where they are working, students are individuals with a lot of differences between them. They have dreams, fears and problems that constitute a completely particular situation for each one.

A really interesting and unexpected finding from the current study, was that students from both private and public scenarios, have proved to have issues related to violence and conflict resolution. The teacher #2 stated in one of her narratives:

“There were some students, especially among kindergarten and first grade-, who were aggressive and difficult to manage. In general, the language used to refer to each other was pejorative and rude and it only stopped in presence of the main teachers”.

Excerpt 1 from Teachers' #2 narratives

In that particular part of her speech, she is referring to her experience working in a public elementary school. It is generally believed that students from public scenarios are aggressive and that they do not know how to manage their emotions. On the other hand, it is a common belief that students from private schools have better skills in conflict resolutions and that they do not use violence in a regular basis. However, in one of the interviews the teacher#1 stated:

“I was really surprised one day, I was finishing my English class, it was the last class of the day and two students were fighting. I went to them in order to try to solve the problem, one of them had stolen the other one a card from the soccer world cup. When I asked him to return the card to the owner, that student became very violent. He even hit me! He did it several times, trying to make me give him the card. I could not believe what was happening. One student, from fifth grade, was attacking me, physically... it is unbelievable”.

Excerpt 2 from Teachers' #1 narratives

It is important to highlight that the situation described by the teacher#1 happened to her when she was working in a private catholic institution located in Tunja, Boyaca. Additionally, as she stated, this situation happened with a boy from fifth grade. According to that, it is possible to see how violence and aggressiveness is not something that only happens in public institutions. Actually, it is something that is internalized in Colombian population. According to Jacquin (2022) “some children may respond to violence in ‘internalizing’ ways, such as by developing feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and depression, whereas others may react in ‘externalizing’ ways, such as by feeling angry and behaving in an antisocial manner”. Violence is present in many contexts and scenarios that people have to live through every day. Sadly in our country, it has become normal to see homicides, robberies and many other acts of violence in the news reports all the time. Students, and the bulk of the population, have internalized the violence and the aggression as a way to solve conflicts.

Another finding worth mentioning in the current category is related to motivation. In this particular point it was possible to see a difference between private and public scenarios. First, on the private context, it was possible to see how students felt in fact motivated to learn for example the English language, considering that they have plans to travel to different countries or because they want to study specific careers. On the other hand, in one public scenario in which 1 of the participants had the chance to work, it was possible to evidence how the students lacked significant motivation due to their life expectations. As the teacher #3 stated in her narratives:

“...these students through their tries lost the motivation and did not find reasons to learn something new. Also, it is important to highlight that

most of students' motivation is reduced to the fact that their families were farmers and ranchers and they wanted to follow their steps".

Excerpt 3 from Teachers' #3 narratives

Based on that, it is possible to see how the life conditions and expectations determine in a significant way the degree of motivation that students can have in order to get new knowledge and ideas in the school. Motivation is something absolutely determinant in the educational process of students. In this way, having a low motivation is going to affect directly students' development and results. According to Laude San Pedro International College (2022) "A motivated student will be willing to work daily to improve his or her own education; on the contrary, an unmotivated student will abandon certain study-related habits, which will have a negative impact on his or her educational results". Motivation is a crucial factor, which sometimes is not present in students who do not see possibilities to continue their academic life in the future.

The current category aimed to present aspects which are not generally contemplated when classes are planned and curricula is developed. However, they have a significant implication not only in the results but also in the process of education itself. These aspects are motivation and internalized violence in students.

What about teachers?

A very important aspect when talking about education is teachers. How they are, how they feel, if they are motivated and if they are prepared. During the development of the current study, it was also possible to find very interesting angles related to teachers' expectations, motivation, emotions and ideas which certainly determined the way in which they behaved in very specific moments.

First of all, it is necessary to talk about expectations. When a teacher starts working in a specific place there are always expectations that emerge at the time of starting. In relation to this topic the teacher #3 stated in her narratives:

"Now, talking about my expectations it is important to mention that they were quite different compared to the reality I faced. Despite the fact I

already had some ideas about how the dynamics in public schools were, I also had this idea to do my part. I have always believed that more than teaching a subject is giving the real message through your subject, without leaving aside the contents required for each level. However, we have some bumps on the road and we as teachers also lose motivation through the process. First, the support from administration staff was needed because for me it was essential to know what context I was about to face, this information was never provided and all I could evidence was through the practice in the classroom. So, the lack of knowledge about the students' contexts and learning styles were some of the information skipped by the staff or principal."

Excerpt 4 from Teachers' #3 narratives

It is possible to see how even when the teachers' role is so important for the educational system, sometimes teachers' perceptions and ideas are not examined at the moment of making important decisions which will be determinant for the specific context. Additionally, cooperation between all the members of the institution is crucial in order to obtain good results, but if teachers' voices are not listened to, their motivation will decrease and the process will not be transparent and efficient.

Unfortunately, the aforementioned is a common aspect between both private and public scenarios. The teacher #1 mentioned in one of the interviews:

"It was my first job in a school. My expectations were super high. I hoped to apply everything which I had learned before and to be part of my students learning process. However, I had to face very difficult circumstances. The principal and the coordinators were terribly rude. They were all the time threatening me when I made a mistake or simply when I did the things differently. I remember one of them telling me that they could damage my curriculum for ever and that I would never get another job after that one".

Excerpt 5 from Teachers' #1 narratives

Mistreatment and rude words in the work scenarios have very serious consequences. According to Cicchini (2022)

"Employees that are treated unfairly are more inclined to resign and experience medical issues such as increased anxiety, depression, and exhaustion. Moreover, employees who are unfairly treated due to dis-

crimination may also bring human rights claims against you for enabling or allowing unfair treatment at work.”

Both scenarios offered to both participants a hostile and even aggressive environment. One difference that could be established is that the type of violence was different. On one hand, the public institution presented an ignoring attitude in front of the teacher’s questions and ideas, while the private institution was directly aggressive making use of threats and intimidation in order to constrain the teacher’s behavior.

Organizing educative system

One of the first aspects that a teacher needs to consider and to analyze when working in any institution is the way in which it is organized. The curriculum, the topics which have to be covered, the guidelines, among others are vital information. In this aspect, a quite interesting finding emerged. First of all, it was possible to see how in the private institutions the curriculum is based on the book that the school decides to acquire. As the teacher #2 stated:

“There were specific guidelines for the curriculum, mostly dictated by the workbook that the students had to buy.”

Excerpt 6 from Teachers’ #2 narratives

Additionally, the teacher #1 stated in her narratives:

“While I worked in that private school I had to adapt the curriculum twice because they decided to change the book that we were using, we only paid attention to that, to the contents proposed by the book”

Excerpt 7 from Teachers’ #1 narratives

Based on these comments it is possible to infer an important problem, most of the times private institutions do not take into consideration the guidelines and standards proposed by the government and the Ministry of education and in this way, the things they learn and the education they receive is not planned based on the plan of the ministry of education, but in the organization and topics provided by a particular coursebook. Based on that, the contents and topics studied by students in private institutions are very varied and different.

On the other hand, in public institutions the scenario is very different, based on the contexts analyzed in the current study, something that can be evidenced is that the curriculum and guidelines are not really organized, as it was stated by the teacher #3 in her narratives:

“One of the biggest flaws in this matter was the lack of instructions or steps to follow when I got there. In both cases, I did not have a guideline, a curriculum, or a syllabus. There was not either a cooperative work among areas and all what I did, the topics to teach, the approach to apply were through my gut. As far as I was concerned at that moment, I based my route and teaching process on *Estándares Básicos de Aprendizaje* given by the Ministerio de Educación and English books provided by the principal”.

Excerpt 8 from Teachers' #3 narratives

According to that, it is possible to evidence how the school did not have an organized structure of topics or guidelines in order for the teacher to teach them. In this way, here is also difficult that students get a standardized content that can be compared to the one taught in other schools, and in that sense it is going to be much more difficult for students to obtain good results in standardized tests like ICFES (Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education Quality).

Another important aspect that was evidenced in the analysis of the data was related to the facilities of the institutions. While the comments done about private schools show a good infrastructure and enough resources, the comments about the public scenarios show an important amount of green areas but a serious lack of technological resources which could result very useful at the time to learn. It can be evidenced in what was stated by teacher #2 in her narratives:

“In the public setting where I worked, the main resource for students to access the language was the teacher. There was no additional material, books, workbooks, etc that students could use independently to interact with the language. For teachers, the most functional way of presenting material to students was through posters, flashcards and handcrafted materials, since there were no technological resources available, and printing materials was a personal cost that the teacher had to assume”

Excerpt 9 from Teachers' #2 narratives

According to that, resources and extra material was all on the teacher, if she wanted to offer a creative and different class, she had to assume extra costs and to find by herself material she could use. On the other hand, the private setting offered a bigger variety of resources in order for the teacher to use them, as it can be read in teacher #1's narratives:

“Something that I liked so much was about resources. All the classrooms had a video beam. I had a tablet that I could use for all my classes, I only needed to download the material before class and then it was ready for me to use it. Students loved to watch videos or play games, and all of it was possible because of the resources that the school provided”.

Excerpt 10 from Teachers' #1 narratives

The quality of the education provided does not depend only on the amount of resources that school has, but these resources mean a good support in order to present the content in an enjoyable and more creative way. The use of different resources can also engage and motivate students to become more active members of the classroom.

Conclusions

After sharing experiences and reflecting on the stories lived, the teachers could explore some insightful outcomes. First of all, they conclude that aggressiveness and violent behaviors are not representative of neither the public nor the private scenarios. Beyond that, they account for big scale societal processes such as the one of internalization that there has been in Colombia. Sometimes, it is easy for teachers to assume that their future context of work is going to be a particular way, based only on the type of institution it is and giving low consideration to the fact that each classroom can only be defined by the individuals who learn together inside it. The experiences lived together are the ones that shape the population.

In addition to this, they reaffirm that motivation is connected, among other factors, to the expectations and life possibilities that students see in their futures, which is highly related to the economical perspectives of the family. It can be difficult for teachers to persuade students to actively involve in learning English if they have been convinced that it does not matter, that they will never have the money or the status to travel abroad, etc. Besides,

for the ones who actually see those possibilities in their future, it is important to keep the motivation high, especially through the use of engaging material that needs to be relevant to their contexts and expectations.

Finally, the authors agree on the necessity for teachers to have safe and healthy work environments in order for them to perform in the best of their possibilities, especially in the critic moment of developing their pre-service practicum, which is a moment of vulnerability and long-life learning when they need to feel supported and guided. Some of the most demotivating experiences for teachers come from this particular moment of their careers, when they have to face main teachers who enjoy being in a position of power over them, or take advantage of their vulnerability -the need for good comments and evaluation- to set aside some of their obligations or 'take a break' from their routines. Equally important, in every other scenario, teachers need to be listened to since they are the ones who are closer to knowing students' achievements and needs. They also need to hear words of affirmation and constructive criticism, that create spaces for reflection -either individual or collective- and institutional improvement as a result. When teachers feel attacked and abused in their place of work, they develop frustrations that end up affecting the quality of their work and the direct objects of it: students. It is worth reflecting on this relationship because teachers are also in continuous learning and institutions should strive for providing this type support if they want to gain better teachers.

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