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SOCIAL SERVICE COMMUNITY EDUCATION AS AN AREA OF TRAINING AND PARTICIPATION FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

This paper presents the conditions and characteristics of a rural community education program in the Mexican context. The scheme of operation and participation of young people called Community Instructors (Instructores Comunitarios or IC) is innovative and worthy of recognition as a learning area, not only for school purposes but as one which promotes the development of social awareness and commitment for the common welfare. One in which identity-projects and social networking contribute in favor of the development of autonomy of participating subjects as well as of the social commitment, both for providing educational services and in their future everyday life.

The data was obtained from the results of a research on indicators and processes for the formation of a political culture in ICs of CONAFE-Hidalgo (Molina, 2008 and 2011).

Background of subjects and communities

In Mexico there are many rural communities of less than 500 inhabitants who occupy about 12 percent of the total population. These small towns do not have some of the basic services including education. For this reason, more than twenty years ago, an educational institution called the National Council for Educational Development (Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo, CONAFE) was created. It deals with community-based education for these populations.

A particular feature of this institution is its educational service structure supported by high-school students who are called Community Instructors (Instructores Comunitarios or IC). They are responsible for developing elementary educational programs and community work. To develop such an activity, they receive a two-month initial training and then a permanent training (one weekend every month during one school year, a total of ten months).

The first part of the training is given by people working in the Institution, assisted by young people of ages close to theirs, who are known as Guardian Trainers (Capacitadores Tutores or CT).

Even though this educational model is interesting and innovative, I would like to present the training and participation processes of these youngsters because their experience favors social awareness and social commitment.

Ever since 1971, when this educational model was created, CONAFE sought the participation of young people, with ages from 15 to 22 years who previously had been involved in the teaching of reading and writing as part of a literacy process. Its success led to the creation of and educational model called Community Courses.

In order to have the educational model and the training of youngsters coincide, the institution created a *cascade-type training model* whereby the Academic Coordinators (CONAFE-Delegations staff) are being taught by Central Office Personnel. This knowledge is to be transmitted to the group of youngsters who, after

a year of experience in a specific community, are in turn Community Guardian Trainers of a new group of ICs. In this second stage, there is a bi-directional teaching-learning relationship among these young persons, whose interests, interaction and language are similar. It is also to be noted that the subjects learned in elementary education are still fresh in their minds.

Initial training is concerned not only with the mastery of content in educational topics but also with the appropriation of a *multigrade* methodology (CONAFE, 1996) which develops an ability to work with children of different ages and interests and also with varied levels of knowledge-acquisition within a group. One of the assumptions underlying this model is that it offers students the opportunity to help each other, finding it easier to acquire new knowledge which will lead to collaborative and cooperative work (Coll et al., 2007), a characteristic of modern pedagogues who create educational atmospheres which lead children to learn from that which Vygotsky (1996) called the nearness-development zone.

This type of work is part of everyday activities because youngsters work for the acquisition of knowledge in an independent way but at the same time collaborate with each other. Watching them work (Molina, 2008), one notices autonomous situations in which they apparently do not show any intention to be bossed by anyone, and share and perform activities as if they were their own business. They know, as any good employer does, how long it will take for them to do a certain activity, how they have to distribute time in order to succeed and which are the expected results. They do not waste a second and, at the end of each class, they know exactly what topics, resources and contents they will have to work on during that month when they are left alone to do their job in their small town.

Creating an organizing methodology to attain autonomy

In tutoring classes, a group of 20 ICs is coordinated by four CTs. These youngsters, not older than twenty-four, are respected in spite of their youth. They lead the sessions showing they know what they are doing. IC learners act as good students would, anxious to learn, and their oral exposition proves their mastery on a theme and when they do not know a topic, they look for it as if they were “expert researchers” until the information is available. During such activities they also show themselves as expert professors preparing their teaching material or organizing themselves in a small plays to present certain subjects; express their proposals on how to do community work, or simply present the contents of the theme they have prepared.

There is a great variety of activities in every session: sometimes CTs explain a specific theme to ICs who act as attentive and receptive and responsive children. Sometimes CTs present class dynamics that help ICs focus their attention or lighten the burden of a ten-hour working day (from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm on Fridays and Saturdays and sometimes even on Sundays). Each participant represents the *facade* (Goffman, 2004) of the role that has been assigned, based on his/her previous experience and in his/her willingness to learn.

The IC group meets every month, works on the learning process, so that upon their return to the community each one will be able to remember and reproduce everything they have learned in the tutoring sessions. Those meetings of hard work give instructors the necessary tools, information and self-assurance to face any

problem in their community, not only related to school activities but also in the communitarian working area. Instructors may indulge in health-care campaigns; conduct any procedure to assist the community or initiate activities to obtain federal or state compensatory programs.

In this context, we notice that the ICs are immersed in an identity construction process, which according to Castells (2001), reflects the plural identities that generate tension and contradiction both in the individual and in the social activities where he/she is involved. Although instructors play different roles as teachers in the community and students in their training or their schooling, or even as community authorities conducting community development work and also as researchers in search of information, we can say that these tensional and contradictory situations are shaping those active subjects who perform a socially-engaged teaching activity that goes beyond the communal service, as social actors that fight for better living conditions, because this situation is meaningful to them (in his/her identity project).

Permanence of young people as key actors in the plot of the programs

A second or even a third year of social service is possible. According to regulations, an ex-instructor may again be an instructor or a CT, if he/she has shown a great commitment and an excellent performance, has been a very good teacher showing a high-quality educational labor and, in addition, has voluntarily and explicitly expressed the reasons for his/her willingness to participate in the programs. Sometimes the reason is that the instructor has had a very empathic relationship with the children or the community members and thus, he/she is backed-up by the parents. Some persons have had problems in their work, but the correct solution of those difficulties has made them grow wiser.

One of the main reasons young people want to continue working as instructors is the financial support they obtain. For each year of community service, they are paid two years of schooling, either to finish their high-school or to start a few semesters of university studies. The maximum period of time to continue as an instructor is three years with up to sixty months of financial support.

After having participated in one or more of CONAFE's activities, a good number of persons recognize their ability to transmit and acquire knowledge. This program in addition to the financial support, simultaneously develops a social commitment in most individuals. It has also been crucial in their professional activities, for it has largely determined the selection of their field of study.

The Parents Association for Community Education (APEC) plays a key role because it is the organizational body within the community that provides instructors with lodging, food and patterns of participation and organization to promote community development activities that go beyond schoolwork. They have the support of the compensatory programs during their stay in the community.

This operational scheme is beneficial in various aspects: the age of students, of the instructors and CTs gives the opportunity of working between peers, and the contribution of youngsters amplifies the educational coverage of elementary schooling, which ensures an acceptable quality education, because the social commitment of ICs and CTs is comparable with that of a professional educator. Frequently, this work surpasses those levels of efficiency and effectiveness of other professors; ICs do not get caught and are not defeated by red tape problems; they

rarely fall into situations of comfort because they regard their daily tasks as something special; they establish an empathic relationship with the community and are willing to do work. The financial support that they receive promotes continuity in their studies and that increases the enrollment of undergraduates or graduates and their identity is shaped based on the common welfare.

While the financial support is one of the main reasons to enter CONAFE, the experience of having participated in this program becomes more important because ICs recognize the personal benefits they obtain. During the last decade it has been observed that both the State and Federal Government provide financial support to promote continuity in the studies from elementary education (Programa Oportunidades) to university studies (Programa Nacional de Becas - PRONABES), which forces CONAFE to compete with those other economic options, in which a student has only to prove his/her family's low income and the minimum grading.

In a welfare State scheme, young people have the social right to have several options to continue their studies. However, in this case, Mexican governments have chosen to consider that young people represent the largest segment of the population and for that reason they must be "taken care of" or as they say, "used" for electoral purposes. In this sense those welfare programs mentioned above are created.

According to the National Youth Survey (ENJ, 2005), youngsters have to leave school early in their lives to enter the labor market. Thus, the reasons to remain in service, may not be based on a romantic vision of community work or the experience with children in the community, but be due to an economic viewpoint closely related to the structural relationships of our country, where social rights and opportunities, both educational and working conditions will be diminished, thus accentuating economic inequality, social and cultural rights. Thus it could be pointing to what the ENJ (2005) states, in the sense that young people could have another option to prolong the amount of time to enter the labor market. One indicator that reflects this option is that the profile of enrollment and permanence in CONAFE has been extended to the age limit of 27 years.

In conclusion: community service is an opportunity for young people to build an *identity-project*

A young person interested in becoming an IC, usually has economic problems and wants to continue studying but requires financial support. His/her desire is working with children or working in rural communities. Some youngsters are enthusiastic, daydreamers, collaborative and have a great deal of initiative. Other young persons express that their participation is due only by curiosity; others say the do it to help their hometown or their country. Very few of the participants have no other option (because they were not admitted into college).

Based on the above, we may say that there are no young people showing a *legitimizing identity*, in which, according to Castells (2001), this identity is one that is shaped on the rules and regulations of the institution, and that hinders the process of autonomy.

The work of a Community Trainer, or IC, is complex and complicated, because at 15, (s)he has to face great challenges. But there is nothing impossible for him/her; (s)he always finds a way to do it, hoping that after finishing the community service (s)he can continue studying. As Castells says, his/her actions define him/her as a

young person with an *identity-project*, and this identity makes sense in his/her life and symbolically defines him/her as a social actor, that is, each reason to stay in the community and his everyday practice leads him/her to visualize him(her)self in the future. If he/she stays, there is the possibility of being part of the community, of opening spaces to participate, of continuing the education of children and act in favor of the development of the community.

In these areas, young people are creating "social networks" where they establish ties that bind different groups of actors through implicit or explicit relationships, ranging from the simple knowledge, lectures and complicity between pairs, to the cooperation and forms of organization to develop a task. Networks are not the result of a single actor, so by being *identity-projects*, their permanent action as ICs or CTs in planning classes and communitarian activities and also in the development of each course, makes them partakers of a group of interactions that lead to the welfare of everyone.

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