

“Of Being and not Being:” Colombian Public Elementary School Teachers’ Oscillating Identities

“Ser y no ser”: las identidades oscilantes de maestros colombianos de escuelas públicas de primaria

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This article presents the partial results of a larger study conducted in Bogotá (Colombia) with public elementary school teachers. Given their nature, and since they are equally affected not only by one, but by every policy of the Colombian educational system, the primary school teachers cannot be treated here as if they taught English only. They are responsible for teaching all subjects (math, social studies, physical education, English, Spanish, etc.). Data were collected through focus groups. Partial results show that the teachers’ identities range from feeling powerful to feeling powerless, depending on where they stand, that is, the field of knowledge, in the classroom, and in their relationship with the policies makers.

Key words: Educational policies, elementary school teachers, teacher identity

Este artículo presenta los resultados parciales de un estudio más amplio llevado a cabo en Bogotá (Colombia) con maestros de escuelas públicas de primaria. Dado su perfil y el hecho de que se ven igualmente afectados no sólo por una, sino por todas las políticas educativas del sistema educativo colombiano, aquí no se podría tratar a los maestros de escuelas de primaria como si enseñaran únicamente inglés. Ellos están a cargo de la enseñanza de todas las asignaturas (matemáticas, ciencias sociales, educación física, inglés, español, entre otras). Los datos se recolectaron a través de grupos focales. Los resultados parciales muestran que las identidades de los docentes oscilan entre sentirse poderosos y sentirse sin poder, dependiendo de su posición; es decir, en el campo del conocimiento, en las aulas, y en su relación con los delineadores de políticas.

Palabras clave: identidad docente, maestros de escuela primaria, políticas educativas

Introduction

The restructuring of the Colombian educational system via policies has caused changes in elementary school teachers’ work. In recent years, after “La Revolución Educativa” (Educational revolution), in the context of a transition from the “Seguridad Democrática” (Democratic security) of the previous government (2002-2010) to the “Prosperidad Democrática” (Democratic prosperity) of the current government (2010-2014), the Colombian National Ministry of Education (MEN by its initials in Spanish) with its policy “Educación de Calidad, el Camino para la Prosperidad” (Quality education, the road to prosperity) has presented education as a pillar of human development and reduction of the disparities (MEN, 2010). Besides the controversy that this view of education has caused among stakeholders, there are the changes it implies for teachers’ work. Thus, this article seeks to analyze the implications of those changes for teacher identity and for different modes of teacher adaptation to these changes and modifications to the career of teaching. Teacher identity is treated here as both a methodology and a content, that is, an analytic frame that draws attention to the holistic, dynamic, situated nature of teachers’ teaching practices.

In addition to the above, the contents of this article relate to the partial findings of a larger study conducted in Bogota, and in which elementary school teachers appointed to public schools in five district areas were interviewed. The researchers used focus groups methodology to collect the data. Participants were selected using social networking methodology which allowed the researchers to have a wide range in terms of age, gender, years of experience, and teaching areas. The general objective of the larger study was to investigate the voices of elementary school teachers in Bogota about Colombian educational policies based on the rationale that elementary school teachers are the least heard (if heard at all) when designing educational policies.

Although teachers are autonomous in regard to the contents of their work and pedagogy, restructuring of education has led them to be supervised and monitored. Educational institutions are seen as accountable, and they are expected to implement constant reforms in order to comply with external accreditation and certification standards (Quintero, 2007). This situation makes us feel a need to understand the identities that elementary school teachers perceive as related to their agency as professionals of education. For this purpose, we decided to use some of the data collected through focus groups in the larger-scale study that we mentioned above, and through a grounded theory approach, to find out what teacher identities emerged in their relationship to educational policies.

Some Theoretical Considerations

We need to put forward, as an initial thought in this paper, our understanding of identity. Unlike the traditional Freudian psychological and the Vygotskian social conceptions of

identity (Freud, 1961; Vygotsky, 1978), we privilege a cultural and political dimension of identity, which leads us to think that individuals, as whole persons, are mostly shaped or constructed via cultural and social markers. In sociology and anthropology, according to Olsen (2008, p. 4), “cultural identity refers to the ways any person identifies with, or is influenced by, broad cultural categories such as race, class, gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, language, and physical ability” (Anderson, 1991; Fishman, 1973; Bourdieu, 1991). In relation to that, Olsen adds that “identity politics emerges as a way to describe how people struggle to acquire power or representation for themselves and the social groups to which they belong” (p. 4).

Connected to the above, and again based on Olsen, the view of teacher identity that we hold derives from the understanding that teachers as social and cultural beings, whose ongoing re-construction of their views of themselves happens in relation to others, their teaching purposes and practices, the dynamics of educational settings. This perspective leads us to treat teacher identity as both methodology and content, that is, an analytic frame that draws attention to the holistic, dynamic, situated nature of teachers’ teaching practices.

Teacher identity as both methodology and content leads us to the conceptualization of the role that research in education plays in the creation of images of school teachers. We are aware that images of teachers are constructed from multiple sources, among them media, but purposefully we are addressing the role of research in the construction of those images. According to Canagarajah (2005), scholars operating in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom lead the international research community. They not only produce knowledge on the matter of teaching, but also produce textbooks, materials, tests, and training courses that are consumed by countries that are off the center. In the type of research that is conducted in those “inner circle” countries, borrowing Kachru’s (1997) terminology, the voices that are privileged are those of the Western ideologies, while voices of local teachers are not heard (Pennycook, 1998, 2010).

Conversely to what may be inferred from the previous paragraph, there are grassroots movements led by scholars in Colombia who oppose the acritical consumption of foreign teaching and evaluation materials and challenge the mentality, which authors such as Pennycook (1998) call colonial mentality. It is a fortunate fact that there are experiences which have taken the shape of participation of teachers in academic forums (e.g. the ASOCOPI—The Colombian association of teachers of English—conferences, and Encuentro de Universidades Formadoras de Licenciados en Idiomas [Meeting of universities with language teaching programs]) and teacher-researchers’ articles published in journals (e.g. *Lenguaje*, *Folios*, *Enunciación*, *Íkala*, *PROFILE*) that account for a conception of research as a way to intervene in local realities. In this sense, the subtractive effect of research that is

conducted in inner circle countries, usually presented as the absolute truth, has now come to be questioned (Álvarez, 2009; Cárdenas, 2004; and Cortés, Cárdenas, & Nieto, 2013).

What We Consider Problematic: Images of Teachers

The analytic frame about teacher identity mentioned above leads us to relate it to the role that research in education plays in the creation of images of school teachers. Quintero (2011) traced some reports on teacher research conducted in Colombia and found that before the 1990s, the field of education had traditionally been dominated by research *on* teaching usually brought from abroad; after the 1990s, instances of research *by* teachers in local settings started to appear. In trying to understand that situation, first, we would say that there is an ideological construction that positions some as knowers and others as non-knowers; this means that research is conducted by those who are regarded as “knowledge authorities,” most likely intellectuals and university professors. The “knowers” are invested with institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989) that certifies their knowledge. On the other hand, there are school teachers who are constructed as “non-knowers” and in need of being told how to improve their teaching. The equation, then, is that knowers produce theories, models, methodologies, and non-knowers consume and follow them.

A second reason for this unbalance in research stems from the first one; university professors and academics, besides their institutionalized cultural capital, have access to economic capital granted by their institutions. This economic capital takes the form of less teaching time and more research time, access to some sort of financial support to conduct field work, pay research assistants, and buy books, software, and other types of material resources. For school teachers the situation is quite different. There is no policy to allocate time for research, let alone for financial support. Teachers do have to fulfill their duties and if they decide to undertake research projects, it is on their own economic and time resources.

We would adventure a third reason that has to do with the poor image of school teachers, which is co-constructed by society and by teachers themselves, and that has an impact on their agency as researchers. Specifically, in terms of educational policies, teachers see them as the kind of things they do not control in their work, but which have a decisive impact on it; teachers have no say in the formulation of the same, that is to say, they are bystanders. As found in Guerrero (2009), Colombian school teachers are constructed in official discourse as (1) *invisible*, meaning that in most of the decisions made by the government, teachers are hardly ever taken into account; (2) *clerks*, that is, teachers obey diligently the orders of a superior who knows best; and (3) *technicians/marketers*, a metaphor that resembles teachers as employees of a “factory” (school) whose “products” (students) are to satisfy the needs of the market. As a consequence, a large number of teachers might believe that it is better to wait until someone conducts research for them.

In the particular case of EFL/ESL (English as a foreign/second language), a fourth reason is comprised of the effects of the strong presence of international teaching organizations in Colombia, especially organizations representing what Nanwani (2009, p. 138) calls “the Anglo-American Style (AAS).” It is true that they have brought positive changes, but it is not less true that some of those have had negative consequences too. On the positive side, we could say that they have contributed to the teaching of English through scholarships, assistantships, cultural exchanges, courses, and the like. But on the negative side, they have self-ascribed the prestige of being the know-it-all when it comes to the teaching of EFL/ESL—which is paradoxical because most of these organizations come from countries where English is the native language and there is not much interest in learning any foreign or second language. In this sense, they have spread in Colombia, with the consent of the government, their test batteries, methodologies, materials, concepts, native speaker preferences (González, 2003, 2007, 2008).

In order to exemplify the last idea, the MEN, usually influenced by external factors associated with agreements or impositions not necessarily linked to education and based on a neoliberal demand of economic growth in order to gain international recognition (Nussbaum, 2012), believe that foreign educational institutions are the experts or “knowers,” which provide scientific knowledge (Nussbaum, 2010). Within that frame, in Colombia appears the British Council, a foreign organization that has been acting as a consultant to the MEN for over fifteen years in the program initially called “Bilingual Colombia,” and then called “Strengthening of the Development of Foreign Language Skills.”¹ Cambridge University produces a fairly comprehensive battery of standardized English language tests, which is administered by the British Council. That battery of standardized tests is used to diagnose and to offer solutions for justifying certification of ideal sufficiency levels of the Colombian population, that is, teachers and students (Usma, 2009; Sánchez & Obando, 2008; González, 2009). Shohamy (2004) sees standardized testing as a problem. She explains that state tests enjoy the prestige attributed to science (i.e. experimentation and statistics) because they are seen as objective, fair, and credible. The “objective” information derived from standard tests is used later by those who make decisions for supporting their beliefs and gain confidence in their decisions.

The Study: A Big Picture

As stated above, this article stems from a larger-scale qualitative study carried out in Bogota, Colombia. The aim of that study was to investigate the voices of elementary school teachers about Colombian educational policies. To this end, given that the qualitative

¹ This program was launched in 2006 and its main objective is the wide use of English. The purpose of the government is that by 2019 all students who graduate from high school attain a B2 level according to the Common European Framework.

paradigm tends to the improvement of the living conditions for humanity and provides tools for the investigation of factors that determine human nature, it serves our purposes because the voices of the participants, as a representation of the human dimension of teachers associated with their daily teaching practice, are affected by the decisions and actions of educational policy makers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Likewise, in qualitative research verbal data are the main input for researchers to make a de-construction and re-construction of reality through the voices of the participants which allowed us to develop views of a group of teachers from public education institutions in the city of Bogota.

In addition, our interest in conducting this study arises from the problematization of the fact that schools have been identified as reproducing sites and legitimizing discourses (Giroux, 1988; Foucault, 1979) through different forms of practices and tools, such as content organization, daily instructional routines, and textbooks. In a shallow look at what happens in schools, it is likely that teaching is a vague term in its meaning. Traditionally, the term is used to refer to the activity of the classroom teachers in their interaction with their students. However, this is only the end of a series of other activities: lesson planning, materials preparation, correction, students’ progress assessment, all that and more constitute an indispensable part of their work. But on a closer look at the school activities, it seems that teachers rely on the work of others, who in many ways determine what happens in the classroom. Teachers use textbooks, equipment, visual aids, work determined by an official program, and frequently subject their students to examinations prepared by others. These are factors in which teachers do not take part and yet are things that control what “happens” in the classroom.

Being aware of this situation, we initiated this research project and adopted, for this endeavor, the purpose of recognizing the teachers’ intellectual capabilities as expressed by Giroux more than two decades ago. Giroux (1988) says that any human activity involves thought; in this sense, teaching practice should not be seen only as a curricular activity, it is also a human and social practice. This activity, which goes beyond the boundaries of the classroom, deserves discernment by teachers and leads them to make informed decisions about curriculum content (from policy dictates) and the specific needs of their context so as to establish a balance between them. It is this dialogical relationship between theory and practice that we want to highlight in our study to avoid seeing teachers as implementers, but instead as free men and women with a special dedication to the values of intellect.

Bogota is the capital city of Colombia; it has an estimated population of eight million people, which makes it the biggest and most important city in the country. Bogota is divided into twenty *localidades*² (see Figure 1). Out of the twenty *localidades*, we selected five for our study. The majority of *localidades* in our study, except for one, are located in areas

² *Localidades* are administrative divisions of the whole area of Bogota, urban and rural.

characterized by high rates of crime, displacement, poverty, and the presence of guerrilla and paramilitary groups. Also the majority of inhabitants are indigenous people, afro descendants, and farmers who come from different parts of the country. All these elements play a crucial role in the way policies are understood and implemented in these schools.



Figure 1. Map of Bogotá and Its *Localidades*
Source: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá (Bogotá City Hall)

In relation to the human dimension previously exposed and looking at the need to implement a strategy of eliciting the voices of participating teachers, we felt using a technique that favored a relationship of dialogue between researchers and participants to be appropriate. Such methodological strategy turned out to be focus groups. Another reason why we found this method relevant is that it provides the opportunity to study a particular topic in depth with a large number of people. Morgan (1993) maintains that the focus group methodology is one of the most convenient ways to collect verbal and introspective data and in which the statements of the participants are the main input of the study.

Participants in the focus groups were selected using the methodology of social network, that is, an acquaintance whom refers one to another and so on. We worked with five focus groups of five different *localidades* (Usme, Bosa, Ciudad Bolívar, Kennedy, and Tunal). From each *localidad* we contacted one public elementary school coordinator. In each of these schools, we conducted a focus group with the participation of an average of seven teachers per group. The profiles of the participating teachers have a wide range in terms of gender, age, years of experience, and education. There were teachers who have been working for twenty

or more years and who hold a bachelor degree and had no graduate degrees. Others have just graduated from college and have started working as teachers. There are some who hold master’s degrees.

What We Found: Teachers’ Oscillating Identities

We conducted a data analysis using a grounded approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) motivated by the belief that looking at the raw data in systematic ways leads to a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study. It is worth remembering that the key feature of this approach is the foundation of concepts in the data where the creativity of the research is an essential ingredient (Sandelowski, 1995). In our study, we conducted two processes of triangulation as described by Freeman (1998): theoretical triangulation, on the one hand, to confront our findings with relevant literature; on the other hand, we did triangulation with peers, meeting regularly with members of our research group to check if we drew similar conclusions when following the same process of analysis (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

During our analysis, we found a core category we called “teachers’ oscillating identities” because we realized that their identities went from feeling powerful, suitable, self-confident, and competent to feeling completely powerless. We also found, that the identity they ascribed to depended on where they stood. When it came to knowledge of the subject matter they teach, they felt they were in control; if the ground has to do with the classroom per se, they also felt powerful. But when it came to policies i.e. planning, designing, or implementing them, they saw themselves as having nothing to do, completely powerless and helpless. In what follows we will describe how this oscillation took place.

Feeling the Power: Teachers’ Identity as Suitable and Competent Professionals

In Colombia there is a widespread belief that being a teacher is an occupation someone does until she/he gets a “real” job. Due to some changes in the regulations of the MEN, anyone can teach. Some years ago, to be a teacher the person needed to have a degree in teaching. There were special degrees to teach primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Nowadays the government opens the door for other professionals to teach at any level. There are professionals in fields other than English language education teaching English in schools just because they speak English or because they lived in an English speaking country.

In addition to this low concept of what teaching means, some even consider that teaching is not a “profession,” it is just an occupation. So while being a doctor, an engineer, a lawyer, a psychologist, or a designer is considered having a “profession,” teaching is not (Apple, 2006). What is interesting in our findings is that despite all these, the teachers who participated in the

focus groups see themselves as suitable and competent professionals when it comes to their knowledge. This knowledge includes not only knowing about the subject matter they teach, but also knowing who their students are, what their needs are, and the best way to serve them. Their knowledge also expands to include parents and the community at large. We have already mentioned that we did not single out EFL teachers in elementary schools for the reasons stated; nevertheless, in general terms, although elementary school teachers might feel insecure about teaching English as a consequence of policy requirements to do something they are not prepared to, when it comes to their own field of knowledge they feel powerful and well-prepared. Cadavid, McNulty, and Quinchía (2004), in the conclusion of their article about the practices of EFL teachers in primary schools in Medellín, offer a supportive statement for the previous ideas:

Teachers with either limited or unrelated educational preparation, and insufficient training and target language preparation are working against all odds. Educational processes in Colombia need to be observed from a reflective perspective that will lead to a determination of characteristics of such a process, its strengths and weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement. (p. 44)

Since our study follows the principles of grounded theory—an inductive method—to analyze data, our findings contradict traditional models of teacher education that see teachers as instructors with no critical attitude towards teaching, such as knowing who their students are, in what context they perform, and what their real needs are (Norton & Toohey, 2004). We found that the self-perception of the participating teachers was one of being suitable and competent professionals. This finding challenges models called educational, which are holistic and focused on teacher reflection, such as the one proposed by Woodward (1991) and Richards and Lockhart (1994), whose trend in pursuing the ideal instructor, technically speaking, still persists. About the instructional activity mentioned here, Portela (2008) suggests a distinction between this activity, which comes from the immediacy of knowing, and the educational activity, which comes from an educational sensitivity. Portela maintains that “it is considered as a mistake to take the mere instruction for all education” (p. 61). This category, of teachers as suitable and competent professionals, should inform teacher development programs so that in the future they are seen as fully developed teachers and not as incomplete professionals (González, Montoya, & Sierra, 2002).

Being so knowledgeable of their context, they criticize educational and language policies because they understand that teaching must be situated. They are aware that the majority of policies come from foreign countries, whose contexts and conditions are completely different from ours, and from the particular settings where they work; in these settings there is a complexity of factors interacting which makes teaching very demanding. As we mention above, most of the schools where we conducted the focus groups are places where teachers have to deal with juvenile crime, gangs, members of guerrilla groups, or paramilitary groups, drug dealers, teenage parents, displaced children, children with mental disabilities, and others

of the sort. No policy prepares teachers to deal with all these issues and still be able to go to school every day to do the best they can for their children (Castaño, 2008). The following excerpt summarizes some of the ideas we have just presented:

Look, theory is one thing and practice is another one, I think you as a teacher, it is important that the teacher is updated, the teachers be at the forefront of trends, because as a teacher you cannot be relegated to teach the way we were taught...However, the teacher becomes a miscellaneous, he must account not only for the pedagogy in the classroom but for external policies that are made around him, but then, there’s uh...creativity of the teacher or the juggling that the teacher makes because one does not just say, “this doesn’t work for me so I won’t do it.” No. One should to pick the best part of those policies, the best thing about them and then see how one can take advantage, but I cannot neglect my conceptualization, my background, and my students. Then, you become eclectic, you get things from everywhere and take advantage and I think sometimes children end up privileged too. (School 3, Libelula)

In this excerpt, we note a tension between alternative pedagogical models and traditional models of instruction found in theory. The former are the result of the teacher’s awareness of knowledge as dynamic and changing (Fullan, 2001), hence, she takes action to self-manage her professional development and be consistent with the requirements of modern times. The second are the institutional/official models that ultimately seek the perpetuation of traditional forms of teaching and learning replicated from industrial models (Giroux, 2003; Nussbaum, 2010). Teachers are then caught in-between these two models and try to reconcile the positions that in many cases are diametrically opposed. Thus, the teacher does not entirely reject the policies, but agrees to make them work, despite logistical, structural, and physical constraints.

Feeling the Power: Teachers’ Identity as Autonomous Decision Makers

A neoliberal model has gradually become installed in our schools. The four pillars of new educational policies are quality, competence, efficiency, and efficacy; this terminology has been borrowed from areas like administration, marketing, and economics. Unfortunately the school has become a setting where teachers are very worried about filling in checklists, formats, report sheets, quality indicators, and others of the sort to demonstrate that their school is meeting the demands of the offices of control and surveillance. What these offices care about is that on paper, teachers show high levels of quality, competence, efficiency, and efficacy (Giroux, 1988, 2003).

However, we found in the data that teachers cannot stop being teachers and always find a way to work around educational policies to fulfill the demands of the State but at the same time to fulfill the needs of their students. Here is where we can see that despite the constraints that educational policies put on their teaching practice (described above), their vocation is

stronger and they find a way to combine what they “have to do” with what they feel they need to do.

One of the main complaints we found in the data is the instability of policies. Each two years the government comes up with something new and just when teachers are starting to get familiar with one model, the government demands the implementation of a new one, and so on and so forth. It seems that teachers are so used to these dynamics that they develop some “coping mechanisms” that allow them to evaluate what is really relevant in this or that model and to make the most of it to benefit their students. In the excerpt below, the voice of one teacher helps illustrate this point:

Another thing is that one has to be a wizard, many times when you are with the little ones, because you think that young students are easy to handle and it is a lie, now the kids are programmed very differently, and one feels unprepared because they no longer listen and it is tremendous that parents tell you: “teacher, you tell him because he no longer listens to me” and their interests are different, everything but study. They come to school to do many things except study. So that one comes to a class and gets students’ attention, that they become attached...it is almost a struggle to make students come to class. It is hard, then one has to be a wizard, you must comply with all the external demands and try to engage your students. How? Well, each one looks for their own resources. (School 5, Vane)

In this excerpt, it is interesting to see that one of the driving forces of teachers’ daily practice is “love”. They constantly refer to it as the motivation they have to be in this profession. Love gives them the strength and the wisdom to take actions that result in quality of life for their students. In this sense, their autonomy is manifested in the fact that, different from the view of the government, they view education as a powerful tool to transform lives in the long term. While the objective of educational policies is that students achieve certain levels on State exams, teachers are concerned about helping them to become good citizens, good people.

Not Feeling the Power: Teachers as Powerless Agents

During the sessions in the focus groups we saw how teachers’ discourses changed according to what they were addressing. For everything related to the previous categories, teachers use discourse devices to show they are in control, they know what they are talking about. In the latter category, they portray themselves almost as victims. There is a recurrent use of deictic words or phrases to position themselves as powerless participants. Teachers constantly refer to “they” to mean the government and policy makers versus “us” teachers.

This differentiation is not in terms of knowledge but in terms of power and access to power. Nowhere in their discourse have teachers acknowledged that policy makers or government representatives are suitable professionals who know what is best for schools,

teachers, and children. They know policy makers do not sit to work on their own models. It is the other way around; teachers are very confident to claim that policies are always copied from other countries; they can even match models with countries, a matching which means they are informed about them. In this sense, teachers position themselves as the ones who know about the context but lack the power to make their voices heard.

Teachers do acknowledge that a common practice from policy makers is to conduct workshops and forums about new policies, not to know teachers’ opinions, but to inform what these new policies consist of and what teachers have to do. Usma (2009) assures that the MEN use a top-down approach to delegate policies and even though teachers are called upon to participate, their voices are silenced and substituted by foreign views of education. Usma also declares that this is what the MEN do with the expectation that names of teachers and institutions be used to authenticate their top-down decision or imposition. Once again, the image that official representatives have of teachers is that they cannot contribute, that they are not suitable interlocutors; it is almost like treating teachers as children who need to be told what to do and how. Due to this fake involvement most of the interviewed teachers state that they have stopped participating in those forums and meetings because they felt like scapegoats; decisions had already been made and those gatherings were simply protocol to validate the policies the government had already adopted. In the excerpt below, one of the teachers expresses her frustration and serves to illustrate this last category:

But I think it is skepticism, because just as was said at first, parameters are plotted in advance, and is more like a...it’s more like a...yes, it’s more like a national protocol, and government policies to open those possibilities and receive some contributions that can be taken into account, but in fact they have established how educational policy should be handled depending on the interests of the international policies that M mentioned before, and it’s very little actually...what the...what countries in our condition can transform in terms of education because they are subject to many other things. And basically it is, right? (School 7, Laura)

We see teachers as transformative agents whose actions are invisible since they do not engage in large-scale projects or networks whose results are observable and tangible for the educational community. Their actions in the classroom are micro, with the understanding that they are actions that have to do with their everyday teaching practice and whose impact is long term. However, those micro actions are likely to become invisible, even to the teachers themselves, and it is only through deep dialogue with teachers that they can bring those actions to the surface.

Conclusions and Implications

The approach used to analyze data (i.e. grounded theory) allowed us to contradict the common belief that teachers are apathetic and not interested in participating in educational

policies. If teachers are skeptical, the explanation could be due to a long history of being ignored, invisibilized, and silenced. So on the surface teachers seem to accept acritically what the government requires, but inside their classrooms the situation is different. They evaluate the relevance of policies and find ways to make them meaningful for their students in their particular context. This implies that sometimes they have to skip some of them and adapt others; all this in order to, as they say, “do the best for our students.”

That is how we found the development of what we called “oscillating identities” in the understanding that the identities they ascribe to are not fixed but dynamic, shifting from being powerful to being powerless depending on where they are standing. As explained above, when teachers speak from their knowledge, discursively they ascribe to an identity that presents them as suitable and competent professionals, meaning that they do know their field and do know how to teach it and how to make their students become involved and learn. They are in control and make decisions based on their expertise; that is, they have agency. On the other hand, when they talk about their role in relationship to policies, their discourse positions themselves as powerless individuals who can do or say very little or nothing about the way policies are designed.

The implication for research on education is also an important one because it shows that local knowledge does have something to say about the educational processes in Colombia, including processes in the formulation of educational policies. This means that university research centers as well as Colciencias should finance more research studies of this type.

By and large the pedagogical dimension of teacher identity becomes relevant in situated teacher professional development in order to highlight the essence of teachers as whole persons. The individual and collective stories of teachers are shown in our study as a useful reminder that, as schools have to undergo institutional change so that they can become places where all students learn, teachers should or must experience a similar transformation. Specifically, teachers learn about their students, identify with them, develop their strengths, and face the challenges of social asymmetries irreversibly reflected in schools. Teachers assume that the hard work of school life is inevitably accompanied by stress and it is this tension that makes the transformations take place (Shor & Freire, 1987).

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