

The case study paradox: a way to engage Colombian teacher educators in exploring the utopia of social justice

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Abstract

This article discusses the 'case study approach' as a research strategy that may facilitate the process of knowledge construction towards teaching for social justice in Colombian teacher education. It considers the case study paradox as a way to engage teacher educators in searching for new ways of seeing and new forms of understanding the utopia of social justice in a country that struggles against adversity. It also analyses the benefits and limitations of case study as a dialogical strategy that may enable teacher educators to explore their personal constructs towards understanding social justice education in order to inform and transform educational practice in Colombia.

Keywords: Colombian teacher educators; case study approach; social justice; paradox; utopia; dialogic encounters.

Introduction

Latin American countries such as Colombia hope through education to overcome poverty, inequality, violence and social stigma. Their educational policies promulgate education as a way to prevent the condition of being poor by inheritance, diminish social differences and promote the path of social justice (MEN, 2002). Accordingly, educators are challenged to implement just and democratic practices (Camargo et al., 2007) not only so as to maintain traditional educational standards, but to guarantee the dream of education for the nation. On the one hand, this constitutes a relevant aspect to be clarified in the 'how, when, and where teachers should be prepared to teach and about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they should have' (Cochram-Smith et al., 2009: 347) in a country that struggles to implement

education as 'an ethical principle and as a fundamental value' (Gentili, 2009: 45). On the other hand, it may be seen as an issue to be considered in the existing tensions between educational policies and education research (Calvo, 2009) in Colombian teacher education. This article aims to present a discussion of the 'case study approach' as a research strategy that may facilitate the process of knowledge construction towards teaching for social justice in Colombian teacher education. It argues that the case study paradox may allow teacher educators to search for new ways of seeing and new forms of understanding social justice education through dialogical encounters embedded in the utopia of making a more just society. It also suggests that Colombian teacher educators can use the case study approach as a dialogical strategy to inform and transform educational practice.

The debate is developed around the following question: to what extent may the case study approach enable the process of creating understandings of educators' meanings and experiences in teaching for social justice? The paper presents first a brief introduction of the socio-cultural context. Then it discusses case study as a research strategy and its different meanings. Finally, it explores the benefits and limitations of case study as a dialogical strategy that may enable Colombian teacher educators to explore the particularity of teachers' personal constructs towards understanding social justice education in order to inform and transform educational practice.

Context

In Latin American countries such as Colombia, educators are challenged to implement just and democratic practices (Camargo et al., 2007)

promulgated by educational policies that enact education as the path of social justice (MEN, 2002). This assumption becomes a demand for educators who are responsible not only for assuring the quality of education, but for safeguarding the dream of education for the nation. At the same time, this statement constitutes a concern for teacher education. On the one hand, it invites teacher education to reflect on 'the knowledge, skills, and dispositions teachers should have to teach' (Cochram-Smith et al., 2009: 347). On the other hand, it prompts teacher educators to ponder social justice as an issue that increases the tension between policy and research (Calvo, 2009) and as a matter worthy of exploration.

Although 'social justice' has been a controversial issue in teacher education (Cochram-Smith et al., 2009), it has been included in curriculum dispositions as 'key concepts' to be emphasised in pupils' learning about global issues (Jones, 2012). 'Social justice' has also been used by researchers concerned with inclusive practices to interrogate the discourses that construct difference and disadvantage as disability and deficiency (Kaur, 2012). Moreover, it has been explored in teacher preparation programmes as a concept that reflects an essential purpose of teaching in a democratic society (Cochram-Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, it has been argued that 'a goal for social justice' should be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change (Adams et al., 2007). In this vein, the goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialisation within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviours in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part (ibid.).

From this perspective, it seems that Colombian teacher educators are making efforts to address the issues of oppression and injustice linked to social class, race and gender. Their struggle to implement education as 'an ethical principle and as a fundamental value' (Gentili, 2009) relies on the complexity of a sociocultural context where education is immersed in the phenomenon of neo-liberalism' (ibid.). This implies the insertion of the educator in a complex world that Gentili describes using an analogy from the novel *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, in which the protagonist, Josef K, is confronted by bewildering circumstances (2009: 45):

'... one must insert in an institutional body... a labyrinth of endless twists and turns, where only

the chosen ones know the way out, while the sinners, blacks, Indigenous, poor, immigrants, peasants, youth, workers, unemployed, women, girls, hungry and starved of food and social justice – embark on the path of an educational journey marked by a foretold failure...' (Gentili, 2009: 45, my translation)

Colombian educators are dealing with structures of oppression and injustice which may influence the vision of social justice of future teachers. Under these circumstances, it is essential to identify educators who are developing efforts in teaching for social justice in order to understand new meanings and new knowledge of this vision. At this point, it is crucial to reflect on 'case study' as a research strategy that may facilitate the process of creating understandings of educators' meanings and experiences in teaching for social justice in Colombian teacher education.

Case study as a research strategy

The case study approach has been a crucial research strategy that informs one's own teaching (Allard, 2006) and exemplifies learning about successful teaching (Zeichner, 2009). It has also been used to analyse the effects of a diversity treatment on teachers' beliefs among pre-service teachers (Causey et al. 2000). In addition, it is central to the investigation of respect for the cultural and linguistic differences of groups of children who speak indigenous languages (Barriga-Villanueva, 2008) and to exploring the way experienced teachers understand gender, ethnicity and socio-economic class in relation to their students (Allard, 2006).

Case study has been defined as a matter of research strategy rather than a method of collecting data (Gerring, 2007; Denscombe, 2003; Gillham, 2000; Simons, 1996; Stake, 1995, 1998; Bassey, 1999), with a common interest in optimising the identification of the 'case' and the experience of learning from it (Stake, 1998). Moreover, 'a case' has been defined as 'the key unit' that is often related to a social group (Gerring, 2007: 1) or as *the individual*, a group, an *institution* or a large-scale *community* (Gillman, 2000). Additionally, the 'case' can be identified as *one among others* or a *specific case* (Stake, 1998) as a teacher (Stake, 1995). Furthermore, there has been a general emphasis on researching one instance in depth, on focusing its relationships in natural settings (Denscombe, 2003) and on considering a unit of human activity embedded in the real world which can only be studied and understood in a context that exists here and now (Gillman, 2000). In addition, it has

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been argued that the 'case' refers to a choice of the object to be studied (Stake, 1998: 86), that the term 'product' calls upon a case record whose final report is termed 'case study' (Stenhouse, 1984 in Stake, 1998: 87). Finally, it has been argued that 'case study' can be defined according to particular views of reality.

Different meanings of case study

Different meanings given to case study are allied to particular views of the reality represented in the research paradigms: ie whereas positivists expose different types of case study in terms of their outcomes, interpretivists justify diverse styles and categories of case study based on the educational action and purposes of the enquiry. For example, Yin categorises three types of case study in terms of their outcomes: exploratory, descriptive and explanatory (1984 in Cohen et al., 2009). Stenhouse presents three types of case study as concerned with aspects of educational action: evaluative, educational and case study in action (1985 in Bassey 1999). And Stake (1998) identifies three main types or categories of case study: intrinsic, instrumental and collective.

Meanings given to case study are also related to the emphasis given to exploring a 'case'. While some researchers emphasise *generalising* from a case (Yin, 1984; Adelman and Stenhouse, 1980, in Bassey, 1999: 34), others highlight *the study of the particular* (Stake, 1998). In the former, case study means theory-building (Yin, 1984) and in the latter it focuses on the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning (Stake, 1998). These meanings demonstrate the tension between the study of the unique and the need to generalise; at the same time, they reveal both the *unique* and the *universal* (Simons, 1996). On this last view, case study has acknowledged the paradox between the study of the *singularity* and the search for *generalisation*:

'One of the advantages cited for case study research is its uniqueness, its capacity for understanding complexity in particular contexts. A corresponding disadvantage often cited is the difficulty of generalising from a single case. Such an observation assumes a polarity and stems from a particular view of research. Looked at differently, from within a holistic perspective and direct perception, there is no disjunction. What we have is a paradox, which if acknowledged and explored in depth, yields both unique and universal understandings.' (Simons, 1996: 231)

Simons also points out that 'we may need to search for "new ways of seeing" and new forms of understanding, not only to represent what we come to know, but to see what we don't'. She adds that 'to live with ambiguity, to challenge certainty, to creatively encounter, is to arrive, eventually, at "seeing" a new' (Simons, 1996 in Bassey, 1999: 36).

In sum, Simons (1996) suggests that to 'facilitate this process of creating meaning from the educational encounters in order to describe and interpret, it is necessary to:

- 1) *recognise the contribution genuine creative encounter can make to new forms of understanding educational situations;*
- 2) *reject the object-subject distinction of traditional research by recognising that perception is a cognitive act;*
- 3) *challenge existing forms of knowing, through using different ways of seeing;*
- 4) *approximate the 'way of the artist' (interpreted broadly to include all art forms) in aspiring to describe and interpret those encounters;*
- 5) *free the mind of traditional concepts, indicators, categories, properties and engage (consciously and unconsciously,... emotionally and intellectually) in perceiving and representing what we come to understand...'* (Simons, 1996: 243)

This means that case study paradox, although it has been acknowledged on the grounds of evaluative case study research, would facilitate the process of understanding meanings of educational action towards teaching for social justice. Arguably, this particular view on case study approach may allow Colombian teacher educators to explore the process of understanding different meanings and new knowledge of their vision of social justice.

Benefits and limitations of the case study approach

The benefits of the case study approach for educational research include its strength 'in reality', its recognition of the complexity and embeddedness of social truths and its contribution to a world of action (Adelman et al., 1980 in Cohen et al., 2009). Case studies are also 'immediately intelligible, they speak for themselves, they catch unique features that might hold the key to understanding the situation and they provide insights into other, similar situations and cases, thereby assisting interpretation of other similar cases' (Nisbet and Watt, 1984 in Cohen et al., 2009: 256). Moreover, case study approach as a research strategy sets up the possibility of emphasising the

in 'uniqueness of a case' (Stake, 1995: 8) and searching for new ways of seeing and new forms of understanding (Simons, 1996).

It could be argued that these advantages may allow Colombian teacher educators to explore different meanings and understandings of their vision of social justice. In this regard, they may be engaged in understanding their *personal constructs* (Banks et al., 2005) in teaching and learning for social justice. This process suggests an understanding of the dynamic process of educators' subject knowledge, school knowledge and pedagogical understanding and experiences (ibid.: 94) which interact with the educator's knowledge of *teaching as a human act* (Freire, 1998: 7) and the knowledge of the socio-cultural context.

Figure 1: adapted from Banks et al. (2005: 94).

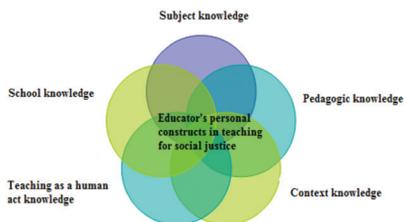


Figure 1 symbolises the interaction among different kinds of knowledge which encompasses teachers' professional knowledge. In this dialogical encounter, Colombian educators establish a dialogue in a strictly epistemological perspective in order to challenge their existing forms of knowing about teaching for social justice through using different ways of seeing, perceiving and representing what they understand in their socio-cultural environment. This implies identifying educators as 'cases' and the possibility of using their dialogical encounters as the 'product' of the case study. In this way, the kind of narratives that would describe this product could be called transformative. At the same time these narratives may be seen as a limitation given the fact that they have been used in reports as reflexive (Allard, 2006) or analytical narratives (Gerring, 2007). Nevertheless, this constraint can be identified as an important challenge in using the case study approach as a dialogical strategy to inform and transform educational practice in social justice education.

Conclusion

The case study approach may enable Colombian teacher educators to be identified as 'cases'. It may also facilitate the process of knowledge construction towards teaching for social justice in a country that struggles to overcome poverty, inequality and social stigma through education. Moreover, embracing the case study paradox may allow teacher educators to explore in depth the unique and universal understandings of teaching for social justice in order to inform and transform their professional practice. Furthermore, acknowledging case study as a dialogical strategy may involve teacher educators in the process of creating understandings of educators' meanings and experiences in the utopia of social justice in Colombia.

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The case study paradox: a way to engage Colombian teacher educators in exploring the utopia of social justice

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