

Popular Education in the Northern Male Penitentiary of Mexico City

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is clearly not a static entity. It has evolved over the course of centuries as a consequence of political, historical, social and cultural changes that have continually challenged humanity (Gonzalez, 2011). In this sense, Popular Education, a model of pedagogy proposed by Freire's (1970) "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", is grounded in the notions of a society that is divided into a privileged, oppressing, class that holds the power and a popular, oppressed, class that is powerless.

Popular education recognizes the political and social struggles faced by the disadvantaged social classes. At its most basic level, it aims to help the oppressed to liberate themselves through a process of conscientization and understanding of the forces that originate the oppression (Beder, 1996). Also, Freire's school of learning claims that by creating consciousness and becoming aware of reality, learners can be empowered to fight the end of oppression, offer a constructive criticism of the status quo and take collective action to transform their own reality (Freire, 1993).

The current paper aims to primarily analyze a learning project on Popular Education that took place among the inmates at the Northern Male Penitentiary of Mexico City. This specific project, as well as other adult education activities organized by the inmates themselves, serve as a basis to explore the relationships between the concepts of popular education, the interests of the oppressing and oppressed classes and the empowerment that Education brings to the transformation of one's own reality.

1.1. The Northern Male Penitentiary of Mexico City

The Northern Male Penitentiary of Mexico City, or 'RENO' as locals know it, is one of eleven prisons that can be found in the Mexican capital city. Built in 1974, RENO started operations in August of 1976 and is now located in the county of Gustavo A. Madero of Mexico City (Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2012).

For years, and like almost all penitentiaries in the country, RENO's inmate population has far exceeded the building capacity. In 2005, statistics showed an approximate population of 9,300 individuals confined to a physical space designed for only 4,500 people (Reyes, 2005). With each cell hosting approximately 30 inmates despite the internal space being suitable for only four, the overcrowding situation became so critical that inmates had to sleep sitting up and tied to the cell railings to keep from falling over each other (Reyes, 2005).

To this date, Mexico's penitentiaries face overpopulation rates of about 40%; a situation that not only negatively affects the inmates' well-being, but also increases the risk during such events as earthquakes, epidemics, fires, or collective fights (Martinez, 2012; Royacelli, 2010). Additionally, the national prison system faces major flaws in security. The traffic of drugs, guns, mobile phones, money, and other illegal items in prisons, has allowed criminal activities to continue within and outside of prisons.

Authorities acknowledge the evident problems in Mexican prisons as well as the serious safety and security threats that these represent to both inmates and wider society. The deep corruption, human right abuses and overcrowding issues have submerged the prison system in a state of perpetual chaos (Rossi, 2012).

In this hostile prison environment, RENO inmates have a place where they can mentally escape this brutal reality: their library. The Benito Juarez Library of the Northern Penitentiary of the City of Mexico has become a place where inmates can engage in literacy, engage in reading and writing activities to free their minds, and essentially imagine a life out of prison, allowing them to temporarily forget their incarceration (Royacelli, 2010). The prison library is open every weekday and books from many subject areas are available for anybody wishing to be acquainted with literature.

1.1.1. Adult Education in RENO

For years, inmates of the Northern Male Penitentiary of Mexico City have organized themselves to serve as adult educators to their fellow inmates who want to continue with their studies of basic education, arts and literature, among other topics (Perez, 2006).

a) Cultural Circuits

An exemplary activity that encourages reading and culture within the prison population is what inmates have called the “Cultural Circuit”. The “Cultural Circuit”, serves as a space for inmates to engage in reading and oil painting techniques while attending a series of workshops that are held twice a week in the prison facilities. The groups for each workshop involve about 20 people. The “Cultural Circuit” consists of each one of the participants reading out loud a chapter of a given book and passing it to the next person, as the reading continues. While the readings are done, some other inmates construct an interpretation of what is being heard through oil painting (Royacelli, 2010).

b) More Books, More Freedom

A second example of adult education happening at RENO is the program “More books, more freedom” which, with the help of book donations coming from private sector, civil society, community and the inmates’ families, has significantly increased the opportunities for those who enjoy reading (Royacelli, 2010).

Recently, the program collected over 3,000 texts, which were made available to the prison inmates. The most attractive feature of this literacy program is that it allowed the inmates to take any book to their cells, provided they committed to write and hand-in a summary of the text they read. Also, books had to be kept in a good condition. Up to date, the program has had a successful response, specially from inmates who feel uncomfortable going to read at the library, and can now also read from their cells or any place within prison (Royacelli, 2010).

1.2 The National Pedagogical University

The National Pedagogical University (NPU) is a specialized research and professional training institution dedicated to the field of Education. For over more than three decades, the NPU has proved itself as a promoter of educational change. It collaborates with Mexico's Ministry of Education, in order to support national educational strategies that can promote a society based on inclusion, equity and justice. Likewise, the institution works towards the promotion and preservation of the local, regional and national cultures (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2009).

Currently, the NPU counts with 76 academic units and 204 sub-units spread all over the country. The NPU Ajusco Unit, was established in Mexico City on August of 1978 (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, 2012). As of 2004, the Ministry of Education of the Penitentiary System of Mexico City and the NPU Ajusco Unit allied forces in order to design and facilitate a learning project of popular education. The project was carried out in collaboration with a self-organized group of volunteer educators in confinement at RENO.

2. Popular Education Project at RENO

The Popular Education Project (Perez, 2006) took place in the premises of the Benito Juárez prison library, mainly through a series of evening workshops during the month of October 2004. Sessions and workshops were facilitated through the joint work of the educators from the Ajusco Unit of the National Pedagogical University and the inmates who volunteered as adult educators within the prison.

By analyzing the way educational sessions were designed, it becomes clear that the project was made in an effort to serve as a basis to unfold social and political learning among the inmates. In it, popular education activities focused on the proposal of a transformative didactical practice: one that would give a meaningful voice to all the participants of the program.

Two of the pedagogical instruments employed in the Popular Education program were: the construction of a "Flower of Knowledge" and the creation of "Calaveras".

a) The Flower of Knowledge

The main pedagogical instrument used for the workshop activities was called "The Flower of Knowledge". Through this instrument, the educators intended to emphasize in every reading and activity the five elements from which knowledge was raised: the text, the teacher, the group, the situation and one's self. Each of these elements represented a petal of a flower, hence the name, "The Flower of Knowledge" (Perez, 2006).

Another characteristic of the learning project was the use of alternative texts. An alternative text allowed learners to break the “banking” education schemes and offered them an opportunity to learn in a format most suitable to them and many times, created by them. The concept of banking education, as described by Freire (1970), refers to the traditional education system in which learners are viewed as merely empty containers in which educators deposit knowledge, this, without acknowledging any previous knowledge or critical thinking of the learner.

In the Popular Education Learning Project, educators and learners used alternative texts as their final course activity. This course activity consisted of inmates representing and interpreting the concepts of “The Flower of Knowledge” and to turn it into a creative and clever poem or song, more specifically into a “Calavera” (Perez, 2006).

b) Calaveras

“Calaveras”, translated skulls in Spanish, are songs and poems filled with satirical humor, which are made as a popular tradition to commemorate the Day of the Dead. This festivity, rooted to ancient cultural heritage, has been transformed throughout the years, but yet it remains as one of the most important holidays in Mexico. Further, it is a celebration of the unity of life and death, as well as an opportunity to honor the dearly departed ones through music, poem, food and gifts (Miller, 2005).

Drawing on this Mexican tradition, to which all inmates were familiar with, the learning activity enhanced critical thinking in regards to the different elements of “The Flower of Knowledge” (Perez, 2006), which had been previously discussed throughout the course, as well as the relationship of each one of the elements with the learners’ own life and traditions. Overall, the project stressed the importance of dialogue, participation and relevant educational content in accordance to a current reality, context and culture (Perez, 2006).

Overall, the project of Popular Education, in which NUP and the Adult Educators of RENO collaborated, allowed the inmates to identify and understand the elements that define Popular Education as:

- A critical understanding of reality needed to for transformation
- Animation of knowledge dialogue presented by the educator
- Facilitation of the learning-teaching process
- A critical position towards formal education as a part of a domination system

(Perez, 2006)

3. Conclusions

As seen throughout this case study, the inmates at RENO initiated their own Education by self-organizing a group of volunteering Adult Educators within prison. This action reminds us that despite the oppressing conditions in which they were

immersed everyday; they sought education as an emancipatory personal, political and social power.

When inmates volunteered, attended the workshops and participated in the reading programs they created an open space for both learners and educators to engage in Popular Educational practices, to highlight the injustices of society and to be aware of how this had directly affected them. Finally they acknowledged their own power to transform their well-being even within prison.

Moreover, learning within RENO was present in many different ways:

- Intentional Learning: For example when UPN and inmates educators planned and organized the series of workshops and strategies to be employed during the Popular Education Project. They intended to promote a critical understanding, through both theory and practice, of the five elements of the “Flower of Knowledge”. They intended to generate collective knowledge, through a system of praxis, the interaction between theory and practice (Beder, 1996).
- Unintentional Learning: Education also happened in an unintentional context. For example, when inmates or educators improvised certain didactical activities, when they shared their personal experiences, when the course activities unfolded in a different way, or when readings were open to the interpretation of each learner. All these, were sources of new knowledge.

Overall, popular education within RENO was conducted through both informal and non-formal methodologies:

- Informal learning, as the spontaneous process in which people learn (Jeffs, 1997), was a key element for this study case. Education occurred mainly through the learning experiences embedded in the daily events of the inmates’ lives. Informal learning was widely promoted through the program “More books, More Freedom”. Informal learning happened the moment inmates were able to read their books either at the library, on their cells or any place within the facilities as well as to define their own learning pace. Their learning was happening anytime, anywhere. Also, they could choose any book of any topic available at the library and interpret or critique the content through their own personal lens.
- Non-formal education is any organized and sustained educational activity that does not necessarily follow the official or “formal” system, may have different durations and may or may not end up with a certification (UNESCO, 2006). In the present study case, an example of non-formal learning was the semi-structured “Culture Circles” in which inmates organized themselves to meet every week, read and interpret what they’ve learned from a certain book.

The case of the RENO inmates is not only a learning experience for the inmates themselves, but also for their educators and the wider community. It teaches us that while circumstances may oppress many aspects of our lives, they must never

oppress the desire to be 'freed' through knowledge. Remarkable things can happen when individuals get together with the aim of learning. These group of learners, deprived from their liberty, were oppressed and marginalized from society. Despite this situation they showed without doubt that they wished to educate themselves, and not be dictated by the oppressor part. Moreover, they found in Education a powerful tool that helped them transform their own reality.

Finally, I think that this study case also symbolizes a lesson of self-worth and dignity as a human being. Education is a right for all, that is deserved not only so that life can be more fulfilling but also, and as the concept of popular education explains, so that we can be empowered to take informed decisions, to critically analyze our status quo and to take action for change.

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