

A study of the way five teachers make decisions in the “EFL Classroom”

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Abstract: This project is about how teachers make decisions in the classroom in order to handle the academic and behavioral issues that tend to arise. Our project is divided in two parts. In the first part, we have presented detailed research on the different learning approaches, methodologies, types of motivation and different factors, which all influence directly or indirectly the decisions teachers make in their classrooms. The second part consists of a series of interviews that were carried out with 5 English teachers that are currently studying at the English teacher degree program from a university in Quito. During the interviews, the teachers had to play a game, which is a simulation of a classroom setting, representing one lesson. While playing the game, our interviewees faced various situations, related to academic and behavioral problems which we consider common in the classroom. In order to deal with all the presented issues, the teachers had to make different types of decisions, based on their previous experience and methodologies.

The results obtained from this project showed that there are tensions between the educational system and the reality in the classrooms. On the one hand, teachers are part of a very standardized and generalized educational system, while on the other, they have to deal with completely heterogeneous and individual learners. Therefore, it is the teachers' responsibility to find a balance between these in order to carry out the teaching-learning process the best way possible as educators..

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL); Behavior; Motivation; Decision-making

Resumen: Este proyecto trata sobre cómo los profesores toman decisiones en el aula a fin de manejar los problemas académicos y de comportamiento que tienden a presentarse. Nuestro proyecto se divide en dos partes. En la primera, hemos presentado una investigación detallada sobre los diferentes enfoques del aprendizaje, tipos de motivación y diversos factores que influyen, directa

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o indirectamente, en las decisiones que los profesores toman en sus aulas. La segunda parte consiste en una serie de entrevistas que se llevaron a cabo con 5 profesores que estudian, al momento, para obtener un diploma de profesores de inglés en una universidad de Quito. Durante las entrevistas, los profesores tuvieron que participar en un juego que consiste en una simulación de la disposición de un aula, simulando dar una clase. Mientras jugaban el juego, nuestros entrevistados enfrentaron varias situaciones relacionadas con problemas académicos y conductuales que consideramos comunes en el aula. A fin de enfrentar todos los temas presentados, los profesores tuvieron que tomar diferentes tipos de decisiones basadas en su experiencia y en sus metodologías previas. Los resultados obtenidos a partir de este proyecto demostraron la existencia de tensiones entre el sistema educativo y la realidad en las aulas. Por un lado, los profesores forman parte de un sistema educativo muy estandarizado y generalizado, mientras que, por el otro, tienen que lidiar con estudiantes completamente heterogéneos e individuales. Por lo tanto, es responsabilidad de los profesores el encontrar un equilibrio entre ambos aspectos a fin de llevar el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje en la mejor manera posible como educadores.

Palabras clave: Inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), comportamiento, motivación, toma de decisiones

Statement of the problem

Problem Statement.

Since schools were invented, teachers have had to make decisions based on academic and behavioral situations. In order to deal with the issues that arise in the classroom, teachers need to take into consideration many factors which will directly or indirectly affect the decisions they make. Some of these factors are the time teachers have to make a specific decision, the importance of the issue they have to deal with in a given situation and their students’ academic level and their age. We need to be aware that these decisions might affect the student’s and the whole class’s learning; in addition it might affect our image as teachers and our relationship with the student(s).

Formulation of the problem.

1. What are the tensions teachers must deal with between school requirements and educational expectations, on the one hand, and student needs and behavior on the other?
2. What issues do teachers prioritize and why?

Objectives

General Objective

To help teachers consider issues that arise in the classroom and the way they prioritize these issues when dealing with them.

Specific objective.

1. To analyze the different factors that directly and indirectly affect the decisions made by teachers.
2. To identify and analyze classroom management issues that teachers consider important.
3. To analyze the decision-making process by teachers.

Justification and limitations

Justification

As teachers we are constantly making decisions in our classroom. Therefore, we have to be aware that the decisions we make can directly or indirectly affect our students’ learning and

development. There are many variables that will affect and determine our decisions. Some of these variables might be our students' age, the amount of time to make the decision or the type of the problem we need to deal with. We decided to do this project in order to find out how teachers take into account all of the issues they may face in their classroom and the way the teachers deal with these issues.

Limitations

Our project will consist of an exploratory series of interviews with various teachers in order to analyze the decisions they make in their classrooms. The teachers we chose are currently studying a degree in English Teaching in a university in Quito, and they are all currently working as English teachers. All of the information that we obtain about the decisions the teachers make will be completely from their point of view, and our aim is to interpret their answers in light of our research questions.

Literature review

Definition of a Teacher

We will first start off by defining the word *teacher*. According to the Oxford dictionary a teacher is “a person who teaches, especially in a school”. If we analyze the definition, it is pretty straightforward. A teacher is someone who teaches Mathematics, Science, History, English etc. But is this really all a teacher does, just teach? Is the teacher somebody who just gives information to the students in a certain area? Socrates once said: “Education is not the filling of a vessel but the kindling of a flame”.

What Socrates meant is that a teacher is not just someone who stands in front of the class and teaches something; he or she is the one who makes students question, analyze, and criticize. A teacher pushes students to go beyond their limits to help them become what they want to be by providing them all the right tools, in order to be competent and prepared for tomorrow's world. They need to be aware of all of the factors, techniques and methodologies, their students' personalities and the approaches they need to use in order to achieve these goals mentioned.

What is important in the teaching-learning process is how teachers motivate their students to learn. When students are effectively motivated, they enjoy the class, behavioral problems in the classroom decrease, and that is when learning takes place: “Engagement is associated with positive

academic outcomes, including achievement and persistence in school; and it is higher in classrooms with supportive teachers and peers, challenging and authentic tasks, opportunities for choice, and sufficient structure” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004, p. 87).

As the three professors and psychologists state, it is important to take into consideration that everything teachers say or do will have a positive or negative impact on the students learning. All of this is influenced by the decisions and vice versa. “...teachers make somewhere between 800 to 1,500 decisions per day”. (Kauchak & Eggen, 2005, p. 57). According to what the educators and authors Kauchak and Eggen state, the process of decision making in the classroom, becomes very often unconscious. The fact that the time within the lesson is limited obliges teachers to make split second decisions based on their previous experience or training. What we consider conscious are the decisions themselves, the materials and in what ways teachers use these to expand and improve their curricula. Teachers also need to be aware of the role they play in the classroom as teachers and most importantly, the learning approach they are using in order to make the teaching-learning process efficient. In the first part of our literature review, we are going to talk about the learning theories and the roles teachers take in the classroom, which directly or indirectly are influenced by these theories.

Learning Approaches

From the second half of the 19th century, psychologists begin to talk about two types of learning approaches: The behaviorist approach and the constructivist approach. These two theories are the leading educational methods and have been used, consciously or not, by many teachers as a basis of the teaching-learning process in the classroom. The well-known psychologist John B. Watson, who established the psychological school of behaviorism, states that: “Behaviorism is a psychological perspective whose explanations about learning are based on the relationship between observable behaviors and environmental events rather than on internal processes” (State, s.f.).

As Watson mentioned in his work, the behavior is only observable. In other words, we do not know what is going on in our students’ minds. Student’s behavior, according to this theory, can be modified and controlled by using positive or negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement consists of presenting a positive or pleasant stimulus for the learner. Negative reinforcement, on the other hand, consists of removing a negative or an unpleasant stimulus which will increase positive behavior in the future.

Another important experiment and theory which shows how behaviorism works is psychologist Edward Thorndike's "Law of Effect". He did his experiments with cats, and he states that if there is a pleasant outcome of a specific behavior, this behavior is very likely to be repeated. Yet if the outcome of a behavior is unpleasant, this behavior is likely to stop. Behaviorists suggest that the same applies to humans.

The second approach is the constructivist theory. Constructivism is a learning approach which is based on the theory that students should use their prior knowledge to construct new knowledge. Jean Piaget, a distinguished cognitive and educational psychologist, claims that: "Knowledge proceeds neither solely from the experience of objects nor from an innate programming performed in the subject but from successive constructions..." (Miller, Linker, & Azar, 1977, p. 377).

In other words, constructivism is considered an active learning process in which students assimilate new information by making connections with prior knowledge and experiences. Using these previous experiences, as well as reflecting on them, helps students build up their own knowledge and understanding of the surrounding world.

Teacher's Role

In order for teachers to do their job, they need to take on many roles during the teaching process. These roles will depend mostly on the teachers themselves and in some cases on the students. According to the writer, teacher and linguist J. Harmer (2001) in his book *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, "Within the classroom our role may change from one activity to another, or from one stage of an activity to another. If we are fluent at making these changes, our effectiveness as teachers is greatly enhanced." (Harmer, 2001, p. 57, 58)

As mentioned above, the teachers don't have one specific role in the classroom. All of the roles we play will be influenced by our goals, methodology, activities or our students. This is why, in order to be effective in our classroom, we as teachers need to find a balance among all of these roles, where our teaching methods and activities used within the classroom flow smoothly according to our students' necessities, their level of comprehension and pace of learning.

Our objective is to focus on two main roles teachers assume in the classroom - the controller and the guide. According to Harmer,

When teachers act as controllers, they are in charge of the class and of the activity taking place in a way that is substantially different from a situation where students are working on their

own in groups. Controllers take the roll, tell students things, organize drills, read aloud, and in various other ways exemplify the qualities of a teacher-fronted classroom. (Harmer, 2001, p.57, 58)

It is clear that “controllers” expect students to behave in a certain way - they are expected to follow instructions, pay attention to warnings or note something important the teacher has to say. When acting as a “controller”, teachers need to make sure that students get information or instructions properly and correctly. They stand in front and assure that all the students are focused and alert. It is important to differentiate between having the control of the classroom versus acting as a controller. For the effectiveness of the learning process, it is vital to have control in the classroom. In other words, students need to be aware of the fact that there is someone who is in charge of the teaching-learning process and the way this process is carried out.

The other role teachers assume in the classroom, which we want to emphasize, is that of guide. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a person who guides is one who *“leads, directs or shows the way”*. In other words, teachers must be the ones who instruct and lead students through the learning process in order to achieve the aims, and the learners are the ones who interact, construct knowledge, collaborate and contribute to each other’s learning. The teacher is there to supervise, facilitate and make sure students are correctly guided throughout the learning process.

It is important to take into account that even though we speak about these two roles separately, teachers are constantly alternating between them in the classroom. In order to manage their classroom appropriately, in certain situations teachers need to be “controllers”; for example, when giving instructions or teaching a new language point. In other situations, on the contrary, when students need to work and build up knowledge on their own or work in groups, the teacher is there to help and lead - he or she is there as a “guide”.

Motivation

Most teachers in their classrooms, use some type of motivation; this might be for students to get an activity done, to not speak Spanish in English class or to improve their behavior. There are different types of motivation that teachers use, each with their drawbacks and their advantages. We will go over intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, positive and negative reinforcement also known as

operant conditioning, and logical consequences. It is important to emphasize that operant conditioning and logical consequences are considered a subclass of extrinsic motivation.

Extrinsic and Intrinsic motivation.

The first aspect teachers should consider is related to two main types of motivation - extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. There have been many studies regarding these and how they affect students' behavior. Extrinsic motivation is defined as an external stimulus which in the classroom can be represented by grades, extra points or golden stars. After offered and given to students, these outside tools provide pleasure or satisfaction for the students which the task itself probably will not. Very often teachers use this kind of motivation so that students behave in class, complete a task or turn in homework for example. "Extrinsic motivation is a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 54).

Here, we need to underscore the expression "separable outcome". According to the two professors and psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, it is important to take into account that an extrinsically motivated learner does an activity, for example, because there is an outside reward or consequence if the task is completed or in case that it is not. He or she completes the task because of the good grade or because of the punishment which will be received as a consequence of not doing it.

On the other hand, we have intrinsic motivation, which is the opposite of extrinsic motivation. "Intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence. When intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external prods, pressures, or rewards" (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In other words, it is an internal motivation which makes students accomplish a task, an activity, etc., because they are genuinely motivated or interested. Teachers usually use extrinsic motivation in their classes because it's the fastest way to get students to work or behave. And although this approach works nicely and effectively, it has some serious drawbacks. First, we cannot maintain the motivation once the reward or punishment is withdrawn. Second, during the course of time if the punishment or reward remains at the same levels, the interest of the students decreases. This means that if we want to have the same effect of the motivation again, the punishment or reward must be greater. And last but not least, using extrinsic motivation repeatedly cancels out the intrinsic motivation of the students.

An experiment carried out in 1976 by the psychologists Lepper, Greene and Nisbett (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 2012), concluded that children who knew that they would get some type of external

reward for their performance on an activity had decreased intrinsic motivation during a free-play period. On the other hand, students that did not know they were going to be rewarded or students that did not receive any type of reward but positive verbal reinforcement, had a significant increase in their satisfaction and desire to continue the task and hence, in their intrinsic motivation.

Although intrinsic motivation comes from within the students, teachers can help stimulate students' desire to learn and find the subject more interesting. In order to do that, lessons should be relevant to the students' interests and should be dynamic, interactive and engaging, as well. This, of course, would be ideal if teachers were able to do whatever they pleased. However, they must stick to a curriculum which often is standardized, and which is being used without giving importance to the needs or interests of the students. The different teaching methods must be used according to the established curriculum which inevitably ties teachers' hands and makes the teaching-learning process very monotonous, tedious and uninteresting for students. This is when extrinsic motivation is used. Students are rewarded and expected to learn even though the curriculum has not been adapted to what their needs are or to what they are eager to learn.

Positive and negative reinforcement.

The psychologist, behaviorist and social philosopher B. F. Skinner in his theory of Operant Conditioning used these types of reinforcement to increase specific behavior in animals. Although Skinner used and proved this theory on animals, this method is very often used with human beings as well. The first type is positive reinforcement. Here, he uses a positive or pleasant stimulus such as a praise or reward in order to increment previously presented good behavior, making it more likely to happen again. Here, it is necessary to clarify that the teacher is the person who decides what “good behavior” or an “excellent project” is. Unfortunately, students are not the ones who determine this. Therefore, in the end they end up behaving according to the teacher's expectations. For instance, a student, after presenting an excellent project, given by the teacher, receives a gold star. The reward will motivate the student to make an effort and continue presenting excellent projects. It is important to emphasize that the stimulus does not always have to be a reward. It can also be a praise, a positive feedback or just a simple smile. Eventually the student will not be interested in receiving a golden star, but something else. Hence, the reward must be related to the student's expectations and preferences of rewarding.

The second type Skinner uses is called negative reinforcement. Here, in order to increase positive behavior, a negative or unpleasant stimulus is taken away. For example, if a student turns in homework on time, he or she is released from doing an extra assignment which would be the case if they do not hand in the homework. Thus, taking away the extra assignment is considered as negative reinforcement. The student is motivated to be punctual with the homework next time.

It is very important to clarify that the negative reinforcement is very likely to be confused with the punishment. As we mentioned above, the negative reinforcement is used to increase positive behavior. Punishments, on the other hand, are used in cases when a negative behavior is presented, and they are used as tool in order to decrease or stop an undesired or inappropriate behavior. However, there are many proofs that using punishments is not as effective as most parents and teachers think, just because of the undesirable consequence it has on children. According to Alfie Kohn in his book (Kohn, *Unconditional parenting: Moving from rewards and punishments to love and reason*, 2005), when we punish, we do something unpleasant to children. We make them suffer and experience some kind of negative result of their behavior, with the purpose of teaching them a lesson which will not necessarily motivate them to change the behavior.

Logical consequences.

As we mentioned above, in order to deal with student behavior within the classroom, teachers also use logical consequences. According to the psychiatrist and educator Dreikurs, “Logical consequences are reasonable results that follow behavior either desirable or non-desirable” (Encyclopedia, 2015).

Dreikurs also states that the idea behind logical consequences is not to punish students for their misbehavior but instead have students take responsibility for their actions. For example, if a student does not complete all the work in class, it will be sent as homework. If this were to be seen as a punishment, instead of sending the work as homework, the student might have to stay in at recess completing the work. Dreikurs does not believe in punishments, praises or reinforcement towards students. He views punishments as “humiliating and offensive to students”. On the other hand, according to writer and the speaker on education, parenting and human behavior, Alfie Kohn, using logical consequences in the classroom manipulates the student’ behavior. “Logical consequences” is an example of what I call “punishment lite,” a kinder, gentler way of doing things to children instead of working with them” (Kohn, 1995).

The idea behind this is that instead of implementing different consequences in order to control and correct student's behavior or misbehavior, teachers must modify their curriculum, so that students become intrinsically motivated. In other words, the aim of the teacher is to prepare a curriculum that is interesting and engaging enough, concerning students' needs, preferences and real life interests, so that they become motivated with the subject itself instead of using rewards and punishments. On the other hand, due to lack of time, teachers sometimes cannot always modify their curriculum. Therefore, an easy way of dealing with the issue is by using consequences which somehow gives teachers a useful tool in order to deal with their students' behavior.

Factors which influence teachers' decision making

If as teachers we want to make the most appropriate and effective decision, we need to take into consideration several factors which will directly or indirectly influence first, our decision and secondly, our students behavior, learning process and development. Some of these factors that will influence our decisions are time for decision-making, importance of the issue, age and their abilities and knowledge.

Time

The first factor we think is important to take into consideration in our decision-making concerning academic and behavioral issues is time. As teachers we need to be aware that in most cases we will only have a small amount of time to make a decision, act efficiently, and respond to the issue in the most appropriate way. In fact, we will need to make this decision in a split second, taking into account that the class and the whole learning process itself might be interrupted. Another very important issue we must consider is the time teachers are principally provided by the established curriculum of the educational institutions or the ministry itself. In general, teachers have forty minutes to teach, practice, reinforce or evaluate, and to this we need to add all of the issues which might be raised throughout the teaching-learning process. Eventually, some of these issues will need more time to solve, or some might need to be dealt with later. Therefore, teachers need to make a very wise use of their time and precisely decide which issues within the classroom must be taken into consideration and which ones not.

We have a limited amount of time to make our decisions. Thus, we face issues of deciding if a decision is worth making time for, scheduling time for decision-making, and how much time we should devote to a decision. (Nordin, 2012)

Importance of the issue

Because of and in addition to time, the importance of the issue must be taken into consideration. As the online instructor and lead developer at “Center for Innovation and Research in Teaching”, Erik Nordin states that the teacher will have to analyze the situation, its importance and how to act in order to see if he or she decides to handle the issue that very moment or buy some time to deal with it later on. The fact that there is a limited amount of time, leads to teachers not making the most appropriate decision. Therefore, teachers must be aware and anticipate the issues that may arise during the lesson in order to make the best decision. Our split second decision-making will also be influenced by the age of our students.

Age

The second factor teachers need to take into consideration is their students’ age. The attitude, behavior and all the academic requirements of the teachers towards their young learners will be completely different than the ones towards adult learners. Piaget suggests that there are four stages of cognitive development. These four stages are: Sensorimotor stage, pre-operational stage, concrete operational stage and formal operational stage.

In the first stage - the sensorimotor stage, which is from zero to two years of age, babies learn through physical interaction and through experiences. Their cognitive development is shown through their motor activity. Around the age of seven months, babies acquire so called “object permanence”, which means that they have developed their memory and understand that objects still exist, even though they cannot see them.

The second stage, known as pre-operational stage appears between the ages of two to seven. In this stage children begin to acquire symbols, their language starts to increase and they start to develop their memory and imagination. They still do not see things logically and do not understand complex concepts. Children’s thinking in this stage is very egocentric.

The third stage known as the concrete operational stage, which between the ages of seven to eleven, is when children start to think logically and understand reasoning. Children’s egocentric thinking decreases, but they still cannot think abstractly.

The last stage known as the formal operational stage starts from the age of eleven and onwards. This is the last stage of our cognitive development. In this stage children have fully acquired abstract concepts, they can create hypothesis and consider possibilities.

Every person goes through these four stages in order but at different ages, and no stage can be missed out. As teachers, we must be aware of the stage our students in general are going through or the stage they are expected to be according to their age. For example, it has been proven that five year-old children still do not have the ability to conserve numbers or liquids. This will determine what to expect from our students and how to deal during the teaching-learning process. Then, it is responsibility of the teachers and the educational system itself to take into consideration the students’ needs and intervene according to the developmental stage they are going through.

Differentiation

The last factor we consider important to be taken into consideration deals with students’ academic level and their capacity of completing what has been given as activities in the classroom. The term used is “differentiation” in the classroom. Each one of our students has their own pace and way of learning. Carol Ann Tomlinson, educator, author, speaker and best known for her techniques in differentiation in education, in her book “The differentiated classroom”, talks about how each student is an individual, and teachers need to provide specific methods of learning according to each students’ needs without comparing one student to another. The author states that teachers who are aware of the differentiation in their classroom,

...believe that students should be held to high standards. They work diligently to ensure that struggling, advanced, and in-between students think and work harder than they meant to; achieve more than they thought they could; and come to believe that learning involves effort, risk, and personal triumph. (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 2)

It is important to mention that all of our interviewees are aware and accept the fact that they need to have differentiated classrooms. They also agree that their students have different English levels, and they all take measures in order to make sure that their students are always doing something

during class. What we observed from the interviews is that the teachers would either give their fast finishers extra worksheets, such as puzzles, crosswords, etc., or use the fast finishers to help out the students that were a little behind. Another observation was that the interviewees, when grouping their students, would usually pair up a strong with a weak student.

Educational system of Ecuador

The ministry of education of Ecuador in its law of education establishes the main rules and regulations related to students' infractions. These rules determine students' "appropriate" behavior within the educational institutions. Each educational institution must have its own code of coexistence policy, which must be guided by the law of education. The fact that these rules are general implies that each educational institution in its code of coexistence must describe all the infractions students cannot commit within the institution. Even though these codes of coexistence are based on the law of education, they are also based on the ideologies of each institution. This means that although most of the internal regulations of different institutions are going to be similar; there are also going to be some differences. In fact, there are many cases where teachers do not follow many of these rules and have their own classroom regulations.

For example, the law of education says that students are not allowed to use cellphones in the classroom. However, according to our interviewees, cellphones are accepted in the classroom if they are used for educational purposes. And one interviewee did not mind if her students used their cellphones even if it was not for educational purposes. Her idea behind this is that her students are responsible for their own learning, and if they do not want to learn and spend their time on their cellphones, it is their decision. In many other cases, teachers act or make a decision according to their personal experience or the fact that they know their students well enough to decide how to deal with the problem.

Methodology

Interviewees

In order to carry out the project, we decided to do an exploratory series of interviews in the form of a game with five students from the English teacher degree program from one university in Quito. We chose these students because, first, they are all currently studying in this university, and they are all being trained in the same way. Secondly, they all work at schools that are considered “good”, for which they must have a high level of English. The relationship that we had with the interviewees was as classmates. We have known them for the past two years, and we have had the opportunity to work with them on many assignments during our period of study. This, in our opinion, makes the results from the interviews reliable and authentic.

Game description

In order to execute the project, the interviewees will play a game. The game will be a simulation of a classroom setting where the classroom is represented by a board divided into squares (Figure 1).

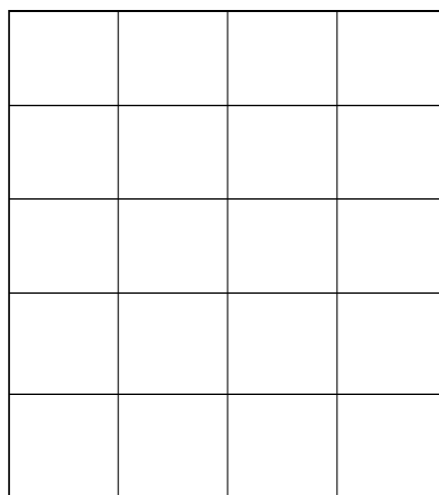


Figure 1. Board.

The students and the teacher will be represented by tokens, which in the beginning of the game, will be placed on one half of the board (Figure 2). The aim of the game is for the teacher to

move all of the students (tokens) forward to the other half of the board. The game will include twelve cards with different issues, both academic and behavioral that arise in the classroom. (Figure 3)

Figure 2. Tokens.

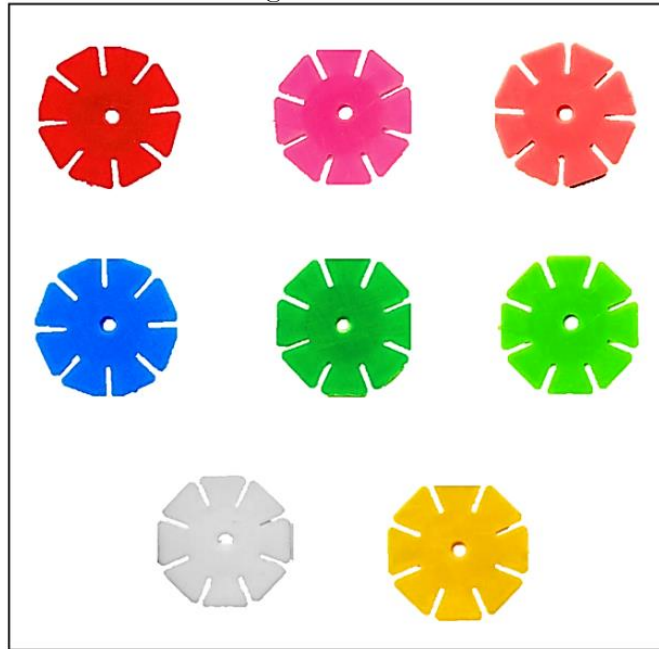


Figure 3. Cards with problems.

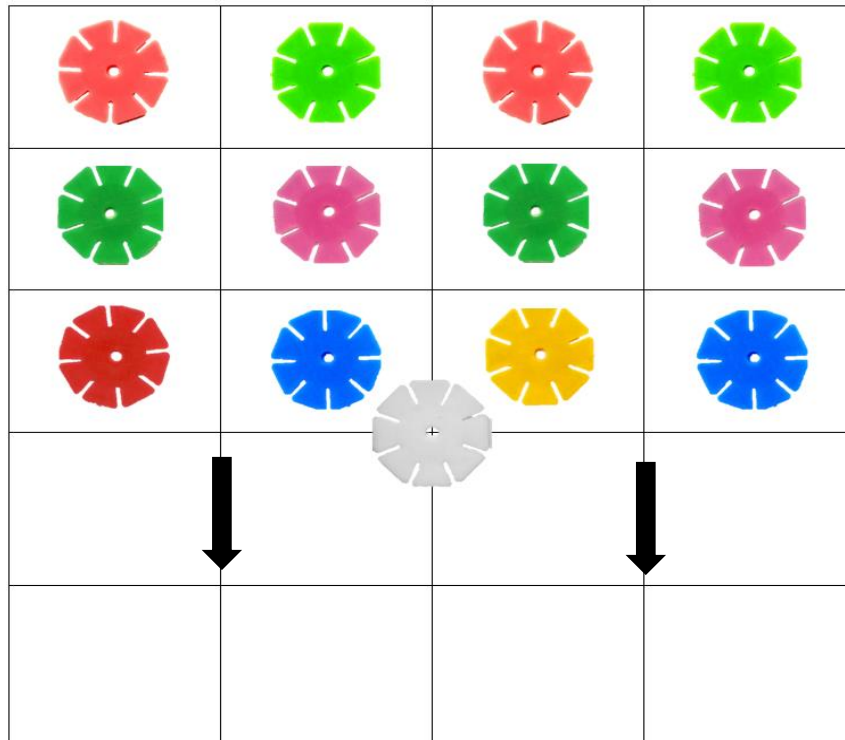
Student does not turn in homework on time.	Student is playing with a cell phone	Student is late for class	Student is distracting other classmates
Student does not bring the books for class	Student commits Academic Fraud	Student speaks Spanish in class	Student is doing something else instead of working on what they are supposed to be doing
Student does not understand the instructions	Student does not pay attention in class at all	Student does not know what a word means	Students that is speaking while the teacher is giving instructions or explaining something to the class

Phase one

The interview game consists of four phases. In the first phase, the teacher has to move all of the tokens forward until they feel satisfied with the lesson (Figure 4). The way the tokens end up on the other side of the board by the end of the lesson depends on the teacher.

Instructions given to the teachers:

“What you have in front of you is a board. This represents one lesson. The students are represented by tokens. The darker colors right here are advanced students with a higher knowledge, here are your intermediate students, and your lighter tokens are your weaker students. The blue and the green are males and the red while the pink are females. This white token is the teacher. You can move all the tokens including the teacher. This game is divided into four rounds. The first round is very simple. You just have to move the tokens forward till you feel that you have achieved your lesson, till your lesson is done when you feel satisfied with your lesson. I am going to be giving you a sign with my finger so when you hear this “sound with the finger” you make a move until you say stop. At the moment you are satisfied you say stop.”



Phase two

In the second phase, the teacher has to do exactly the same thing as the first phase, but with one difference - a problem is introduced (Figure 5). The teacher has to pick randomly one card out of twelve that consist of academic or behavioral issue. They must replace a token from the board with a yellow token which represents the problem.

Instructions given to the teachers:

“Second round is the same as the first round the only difference here is that a problem is introduced. Here you have twelve cards; they are behavioral and academic problems. You are going to pick one card, read it and keep it to yourself. This yellow token represents the student with the problem so what you are going to do is just substitute one of these tokens with the yellow token. And then you do exactly the same. You are going to move the students forward until you are satisfied with your lesson”

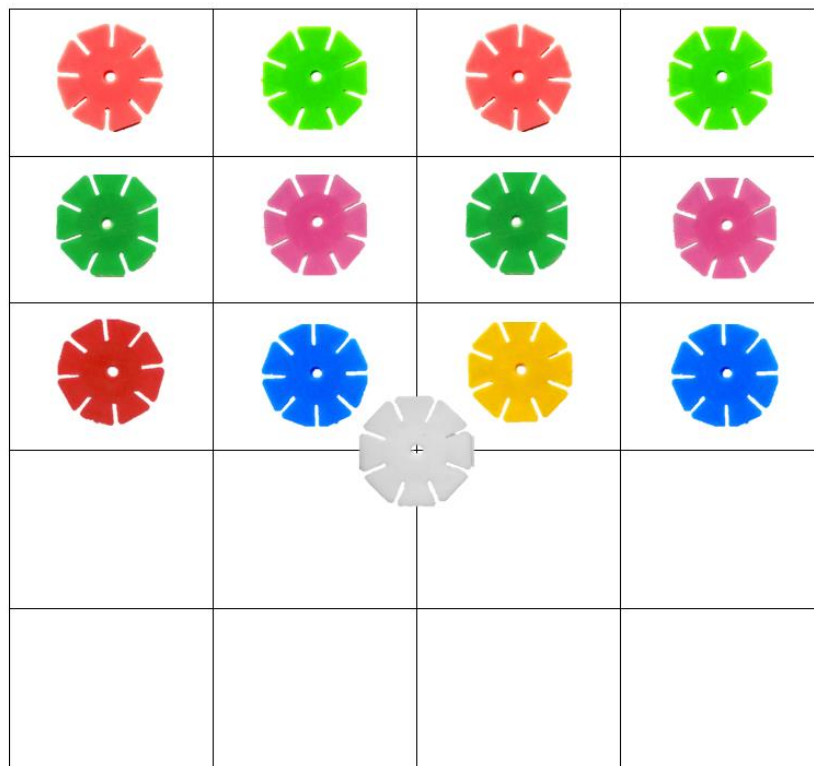


Figure 5. Board with tokens and 1 problem introduced.

Phase three

In the third phase, the same thing is done as the other phases but the number of the problems increases to three (Figure 6). Everything else remains the same. Once this phase is completed, the teacher has to read all twelve cards and discard the ones that don't apply to their class. They must replace the cards with issues that are relevant to them.

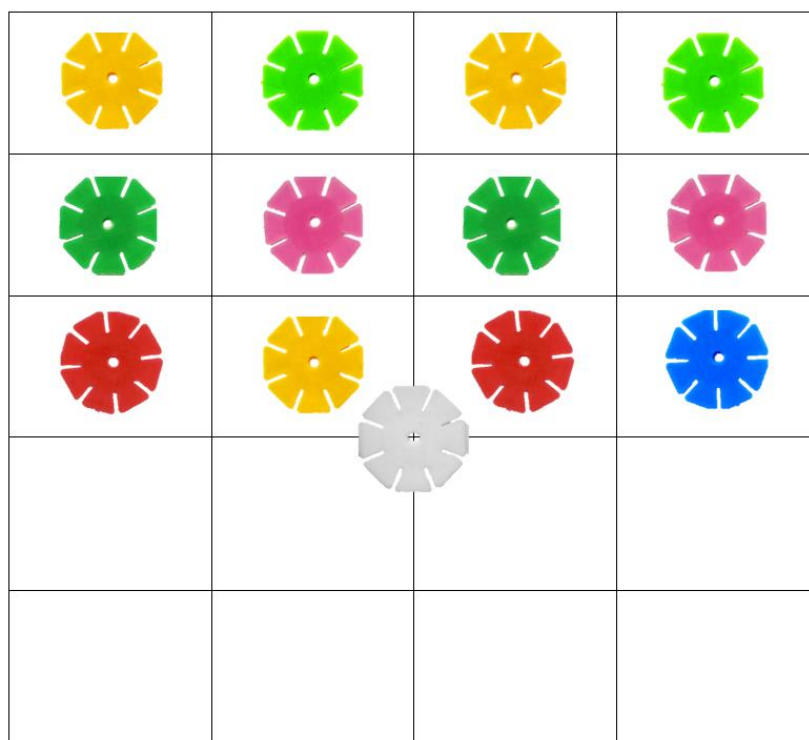


Figure 6. Board with tokens and 3 problems introduced.

Phase four

The fourth phase is executed as the same as the others, but here five problems are introduced (Figure 7). Throughout the whole game, at the end of each phase we ask a number of questions. For example:

“What was the problem?”

“Did you substitute the yellow token with a specific kind of a student on purpose?”

“Why did you put the student, represented by the yellow token, next to the teacher?”

“What do you usually do when a student does not turn in homework?”

The teachers have to answer them, analyzing, justifying and prioritizing all of the decisions they have made.

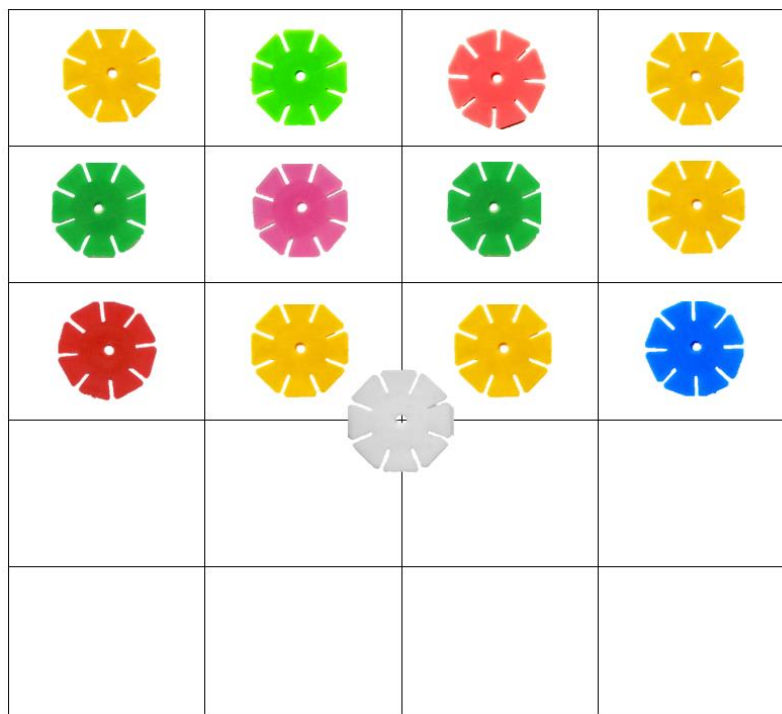


Figure 7. Board with tokens and 5 problems introduced.

At the end of the game, once all of the four phases are completed, the teachers have to look at all of the cards and select the ones which contain problems, which call for the lesson to be interrupted. Teachers are asked to justify their answer.

Analysis of results

Description of the interviewees

All of our interviewees work in upper-middle class schools, situated in the north part of Quito. Sandra teaches second and fifth graders. Renata teaches third graders. Karolina teaches 4th and 5th graders. Veronica teaches 8th and 9th graders, and Geovanna teaches high school students. Veronica is the only teacher who works in an all-girls school, and all the rest work in mixed schools.

Results, related to the literature review

After all of the interviews with the teachers, we analyzed the results, and went through most of the issues the teachers face in the classroom. Throughout the experiment, various results came up. These results were related to many of the factors mentioned in our literature review and showed us the way teachers deal with the problems that arise in the classroom.

Result one - Board interpretation.

The first result that was analyzed was that every teacher we interviewed saw the board spatially instead of temporally. The original idea was that the board itself represented one lesson and the tokens represented the knowledge of the students within a classroom. The end of the board represented the knowledge students acquired by the end of the lesson. Interestingly, all of the teachers either misunderstood or perceived the board as the classroom itself. They all started by placing the tokens according to their classroom setting and their students' abilities and personalities. This inevitably influenced the decisions that were made by the teachers. Basically, what we saw was that the teachers, perhaps by force of habit or the way teachers usually think, perceived the board spatially as if it was their own classroom. It was difficult for them to portray the board temporally as a lesson and not take into account the margins of the physical space.

Result two – Differentiation.

The second result we obtained was how teachers dealt with differentiation in their classroom. As the board was seen spatially, the teachers rearranged their classrooms so that the weaker students sit in the front. The idea behind this was that the teachers could help their students whenever they were needed. By the end of the lesson, the teachers would make sure that the weaker students are either placed close to the teacher or sat next to a fast finisher so that they are always provided help when needed. Another interesting observation was that not one teacher out of all tried to push their fast finishers beyond their limits once they completed their assignments. For example, Karolina, Veronica, Renata and Sandra tend to give crosswords and other puzzles to their students in order to reinforce what has already been seen. The idea behind this is that the weaker students will not be left behind. Geovanna is the only teacher that does not give extra work to the fast finishers, but she uses them to help the weaker students with the assignments. We also observed that the interviewees when grouping their students, tend to always pair up fast finishers with weaker students so that the stronger students could help the weaker ones.

Result three - Rewards and punishments.

The third finding that came up was the issue related to rewards and punishments. All of the interviewees tend to use rewards and punishments to control students' behavior in their classrooms. For all of them, except Geovanna, this is the best approach for controlling and maintaining the classroom discipline and students' academic performance. Because of the fact that Geovanna's students are older, she doesn't punish them as the other teachers would. Due to the fact that it's the students' responsibility how they manage their studies, she is more easygoing in terms of controlling the discipline in the classroom and the learning process.

Analysis of the decision making, regarding behavior and academic issues

As mentioned above, the interviewees were given cards which included academic or behavioral issues that teachers face in the classroom. Our interviewees had to explain the way they handled the problem they picked from the cards. In this part, we will present all of the problems our interviewees had to deal with throughout the game and the actions they took in order to deal with them. In order to structure our analysis, we have divided the problems in two branches - behavior and academic problems. Taking into account that all the interviewees teach students from different grades, we have decided to present our interviewees' answers starting with the teacher who teaches the lowest grade.

Behavior problems.

Student is distracting another classmate.

The first problem that came up with four interviewees was about a student distracting another classmate. Vero said that the students who usually distract are her advanced students. When that happens, she taps the students on the shoulder or tries to distract them from what they are doing so that the students are aware that the teacher knows what is going on. Karolina handles this problem by going up to the student that is being distracted and tells him or her that if they speak to the student that distracts them, they will get a point less from their final mark of class work. Renata, on the other hand, attracts the student's attention first. If they continue, she writes their name on a chart which means that they cannot play on fun Friday. Renata did not specify what the students do if they do not play on fun Friday. In Geovanna's class they are usually girls or weaker students that distract. She usually handles the issue by calling their attention. Geovanna did not really specify how she gets her students' attention.

Student is doing something else instead of working on what they are supposed to be doing.

The second problem that came up was related to students doing something else instead of working. When this occurs in Renata's class, she calls on the student in front of everybody. Karolina takes the object away and notes the issues on the student's agenda which needs to be presented to the parents so that they can be aware of what happened. In Veronica's class it is usually a weaker student, and what she does is take away the object that distracts the student and doesn't give it back until the student's parents go and pick it up from her. She doesn't warn the students before taking the object away because on the first day of class she goes over all of the rules. If Geovanna sees a student doing something off-task with an object while she walks around, she asks him or her to put the object away.

Student is using his or her cell phone.

The third problem that we encountered was about students using their cell phones during class. Sandra's students are too young to have cell phones, but they bring in toys instead. Sandra uses the "one, two, three system" when her students bring in toys. One is a warning, two is a red light and on three, she takes the toy away. When she takes the toy away, she just puts it aside and gives it back once the lesson is over. If the student keeps on playing with the toy in class, she will talk to them personally or calls or send a note to the child's parents. Veronica allows her students to use a cell phone during class only if the device is used for educational purposes. If one of her students uses the phone for a different reason, the teacher takes away the cell phone and leaves it in her locker at school and gives it back once the student has told her parents about the issue. Once she takes the cellphone away, Veronica calls the parents and has a meeting with them. They all make a pact in which the parents agree to talk to their daughter to have an interest in the subject of English and to not use the cell phone in class unless it is for educational purposes. Veronica also states that apart from having this conversation with her students' parents that she also talks to the student beforehand in order to change her attitude towards English. The last teacher that faces this kind of problem in her classroom is Geovanna. She does not mind if her students use their cell phones during class if it is for educational purposes. When students are using their cell phone for off-task purposes, she tells her students to put their cellphone on the table in front, so that they do not feel tempted to use it again.

Student that is speaking while the teacher is giving instructions or explaining something to the class.

The fourth problem discussed was about students who are speaking while the teacher is speaking. Renata tells the students to stop talking and pay more attention to her. If the problem persists, she separates the students' desks. In Karolina's class, it is a weaker student who usually does this. After the class she has a talk with the students about what happened.

Student does not pay attention in class.

The fifth problem is related to students who do not pay attention in class. Sandra first talks to the student and if the behavior persists, she goes over the student's file to see whether the student has an emotional or learning problem. If she finds out that one has already been detected, she takes action for dealing with the situation. If the file does not say anything, she talks to the psychologist and mentions that she thinks that there is a problem with the student, so that further actions by the psychological department can be taken. Karolina moves this student to the front row and gives them chores such as helping her with wiping the board, or making photocopies, etc. Geovanna goes up to the student and asks him or her if everything is OK and to please focus.

Student is late for class.

The sixth problem is related to students who are late for class. Sandra mentions that her advanced students are the ones who are usually late for class. They have to stay for five minutes in class during the recess, and they cannot move or speak. If they do, they have to stay for one more minute. Karolina's students who are late for class are usually the boys. They have to stay in five minutes after the class finishes. Geovanna's late students are usually girls, and in order to get in they need a pass from the inspector at her school.

Academic problems.

Student commits academic fraud.

The first problem is related to students who commit academic fraud. The issue arose only during two of the interviews. Veronica stated that her students that usually commit academic fraud are the weaker students. Her advanced students would never do that. When a student is caught copying, she is assigned a presentation about honesty, and the presentation is graded. When one of Geovanna's students copies, she usually asks them why they did it, and if it is a weaker student, it is

usually because he or she did not understand or know how to do it. The teacher gives the students a second chance. She does not punish them because there is not any regulation about the issue at her school, but she makes students do the copied assignment again.

Student does not know what a word means.

The second problem that came up was about students who do not know what a word means. Sandra uses different techniques when her students do not know what a word means. First, she gives an example of the word or makes students remember the word from the lesson before. The second technique she uses is giving the word in English or writing the word on the board. If it is more than one student, Renata explains the word to the whole class by miming or drawing the word, but if it is only one student that does not understand, she explains the word or simply translates it. If the word is difficult, she translates it. Karolina first has her students look up the word in a dictionary, and if they get it right, they get a star so that more students get motivated to do the same next time. Veronica has all of her students buy an all English dictionary. She first has them look up the word and try to understand it by themselves. If they still do not understand the word, she will then explain it. Geovanna faces a different issue. Her students, instead of asking what a word means, want to know how to say a specific word in English. She, like the other teachers in our study is a non-native speaker. If she knows how to say the word, she writes it on the board. Otherwise, she has her students look up the word in a dictionary.

Student does not understand instructions.

The third problem is about students who do not understand instructions for an assignment. In Sandra's class, when a student does not understand instructions, it is usually a weaker student. This student is placed in the middle so that the teacher is closer and can help whenever is necessary. Veronica uses instruction checking before students begin the activity so that she can be sure that all of the students have understood. After Geovanna gives instructions, she does instruction checking by asking her students short questions related to what they have to do, and if a student still does not understand, she has another student rephrase the instruction.

Student speaks Spanish in class.

The fourth problem deals with students who speak in Spanish during the class. Sandra does not do much in her second grade class, because her students are very young. However, she tries to make them express themselves in English. Her fifth grade students have to bring candies or gum to

share with the classmates whenever they speak in Spanish. Renata asks her students to repeat what they want to say in English. If they do not say it in English, she doesn't pay attention to them. Karolina motivates her students to speak English by giving them stars each time a student does not speak in Spanish. Geovanna uses a card system for students who speak Spanish. When a student speaks in Spanish, she hands him or her a card. Whenever this student hears another student speak Spanish, he or she hands the card to the other student and so on until the lesson is over. Students who have not received the card during the whole lesson get a point.

Student does not turn in homework on time.

The fifth problem is related to students who do not turn in homework. If one of Renata's students does not turn in homework, she puts the student next to her so that at the end of the lesson she can remember to write to the students' parents about the issue. Geovanna allows her students to hand in the homework on the next day, but she does not really make a big deal out of it. According to what she said, we assume that she is the only one who does not really mind when the homework is handed in.

Student does not bring the books for class.

The sixth problem is about students who do not bring their books for class. Sandra allows her students to work together if it's a reading task. Otherwise she gives her students a blank piece of paper for the activity and then, students have to glue the paper in their notebook. Karolina allows this to happen just once. The next time she speaks to the student's parents. Geovanna allows her student to work on a paper sheet as well and then paste it in their workbook.

Problems, given by the interviewees

Apart from these twelve problems, the interviewees were asked to write their own problems which they face in their classrooms. Veronica and Sandra said that they have issues regarding students that have home problems. For them this is very important because it affects the student both behaviorally and academically. Veronica tries to talk to the students first because she sees her students as her own daughters, and then she talks to the class so that her classmates are aware that this particular student is going through a difficult problem at home. Sandra does the same, but she asks student's parents for help as well. A problem that Karolina faces is that her students get bored very easily. Therefore, she tries to give them additional activities or make them help the weaker students. Renata

is the only teacher that has a student with attention deficit disorder (ADD). First, she keeps an eye on the student all the time. Second, she needs to give this student shorter activities and modify the whole curriculum for that particular student.

Problems considered important enough to stop a lesson

From all of the issues we have seen so far, we are going to go through the ones our interviewees consider important enough to stop a lesson. With the term “stop the lesson” what we refer to is to have all of the students pause what they are doing so that the teacher can get their complete attention because the issue needs to be dealt with immediately. Veronica is the only teacher out of the five we have interviewed who would stop her lesson because a student is having home problems. She would not do this with the student present in the classroom. Veronica says that she would ask the student to do something for her outside the classroom and she would use that moment to talk to the rest of the students about the rough time their classmate is going through.

The rest of the teachers consider stopping the class when a behavioral or an academic issue is presented. Karolina would stop her lesson if one of her students is distracting a classmate, a student is late for class, student is speaking while the teacher is speaking and when more than one student do not know what a word mean. Sandra would stop her lesson when a student is speaking while she is giving instructions. Renata will do this if more than one student does not understand instructions, if students are distracting their classmates or in case that students are speaking while she is giving instructions. Geovanna would pause her lesson if one of her students does not know how to say a word.

Conclusions

The fundamental objective of this work has been to find out how teachers find the balance between teaching a group of students and addressing each child’s individual needs while respecting the schools laws and the Ecuadorian educational system.

Nowadays, many teachers might not be completely aware of many aspects which in one way or another have an influence in the teaching-learning process. People who work as educators must take into consideration what it really means to be an educator. As we mentioned above, the teacher is not just someone who stands in front of the class and has as an objective to pass on knowledge to the students. He or she needs to consider that there have been studies about the learning approaches, the types of motivation and the factors which will determine their methodologies, teaching and learning

strategies and their decisions as well. What is important to underline is that teachers have always put all of these aspects into practice, without being aware of doing so. Many well-known psychologists and educators have carried out studies and experiments regarding these aspects. If teachers were to be acquainted with them, they can make the most of their advantages and disadvantages, which will improve the teaching-learning process.

This study has highlighted various tensions between the educational system and the reality the teachers face every day in their classrooms. From what we have seen, it is obvious that the educational system generalizes and standardizes regulations, methodologies, grades, etc. without taking into consideration students' interests, individuality, their cognitive development or their needs. This inevitably creates different obstacles, issues and difficulties for the teachers; on one hand, teachers have to obey and complete everything institutions ask for, and on the other hand, if they want to carry out the purpose of their job, they need to avoid all of these requirements and do what needs to be done.

After mentioning all of the above, we want to emphasize that teachers are required to follow the educational system. Here is where the educational system and the aspects mentioned above collide. Although teachers want to adapt and apply all of the theories in their classroom, they are limited and obliged to follow certain regulations and norms by the educational system, thus, making it not possible to standardize education and treat students as individuals as well. As a result, the teachers' job will be to try to work along with the system and apply the theories at the same time. What needs to be done is to find the perfect balance between these and do the best in order to do our job as educators.

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