SCHOOL DROPOUT: A CASE STUDY IN COLIMA, MEXICO

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Abstract

The situation of the teacher of languages in Mexico, is very clear and is not a matter of interpretations. From the perspective of the current authorities, English does not require teachers to be taught. They affirm that an online platform is sufficient and that the Spanish teacher, with basic education, can perfectly assume that task. The well-known politic named fourth transformation (4T in Spanish), comes to add one more factor to the already large list of reasons that cause the desertion of a career whose main area of professional performance is teaching English. This investigation arises as a result of our interest, and concern, for the significant desertion experienced in recent years. We outlined the main question as: What factors influence dropout? And two subsidiary questions: What is the role of teachers in this desertion scenario? And what is the position of the university authorities? It is evident that, being a complex social phenomenon, one of the best ways to approach it is from the Critical Paradigm, which implies not circumscribing the simple demand for truth. In the same way, the Qualitative Approach was assumed, as the best way in which we, in our role as researchers, can place ourselves at the center of the phenomenon, observe it, register it, analyze it and elaborate a holistic vision of its characteristics from the voices of the subjects. The procedures of the Case Study method are adopted, as it is the best way to know the how and why of the object of study. There have been identified as the main causes of abandonment: 1) Expectation versus reality, it means that students entered the program with expectations of traveling around the world and being interpreters or translators, when the reality is that their professional performance will be as language teachers. A group of students affirms, in a convincing way, that they do not like the subjects of the pedagogical area. 2) Family and money issues, another reason why the career is abandoned is for family and/or economic matters. 3) Quality of the teacher-student interaction, in this sense, the students state that their professors and authorities show little interest, or the interest for them is null. Additionally, the participants expressed the reasons that have made them stay in the program. Those subjects, that have already graduated, manifest what they consider made them finish their undergraduate studies. The study has met its objective, partially, it is expected to deepen into other factors and a larger student population. This report is part of a macro project that is carried out by a group of researchers from the Faculty. This academic body studies the professionalization of the new millennium generation and the quality indicators established by the University of Colima, in México. It is expected that the data analyzed, so far, allow to establish new work strategies that contribute to greater permanence and higher levels of completion and graduation. It is clear that students who remain in the career expect a better proposal of professional training that meets their expectations. In the same way, they hope that the monetary supports will be maintained, and the training costs will be the same or lower. An expectation, which from our perspective is the most important, is to be seen as persons, and to be educated with respect and human quality.

Keywords: School dropout, teaching languages, case study.

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2016, a new educational plan was launched, which, from its theoretical conceptualization, was based on greater flexibility. In previous publications, it has already been shown that flexibility only remained in the curricular document. The start-up of the program shows the opposite. These changes have had a direct impact on the faculty's permanence and graduation indicators. On this occasion, we focus on a fundamental aspect, school dropout, seen from the perspective of the students, who still remain in the program. It is known that the topic is relevant and of great importance, not only at the local level, but national and international. The state of the art shows similar studies throughout the country, in universities in Latin America and all over the world. The study is justified based on the lack of knowledge, to date, of the perception of students and university authorities about the factors that cause the dropout of the undergraduate languages program. It is considered as a research problem,
the unawareness that exists, in our closest environment, some factors that cause students to abandon their studies.

1.1 State of the art

According to the results of a study applied in upper secondary education in Mexico, some authors [1], conclude that: "the consequences of dropping out are many, ranging from the most apparent, which is the inability to pursue higher education (which has the highest economic returns) to reduced opportunities for securing employment, access to lower wages, and higher levels of informality" (p. 11).

Studies on dropout, in Latin America, are updated on the educational agenda of the Ministries of Education (SEP in the case of Mexico) because it is an issue that affects us all. Although there is marked interest in detecting the causes of dropping out, most of the studies have focused on the statistics that need to be known. But, the sociocultural characterization of students in the university, may provide remarkable keys to refine studies from qualitative aspects and approach the phenomenon from a more holistic understanding of the problem [2].

Searching for what is happening with Mexico’s neighbor at the north. It was found this study, which concludes that in the case of USA, half of the Hispanic students leave high school without graduating [3]. Some researchers found that not even a scholarship program in Mexico had positive impacts. The program aimed at improving graduation rates and test scores among upper secondary students from poor backgrounds. The authors suggest that the program should be complemented with remedial education intervention in order to succeed [4].

Mendoza [5], founded that her study bears out Bourdieu’s argument that cultural and economic capital contribute to explain why students make progress in school, although, she understands that her paper challenges Bourdieu’s view of the role of freedom of educational choice. The author provides with a list of some implications for educational policies.

1.2 Research problem

The literature shows a wide range of ways to approach similar situations in Mexico and in the rest of the world. For this particular case (The case of Colima), we stated as a research problem the following: What are the factors that motivate students to drop out of their university studies? The boundaries of the case were defined as follows: 1) causes of dropping out and motivation to remain studying. 2) The subjects of study are exclusively a sample of students of the late semesters at the School of Languages (sixth and eighth). 3) Subjects’ personal opinion, which means not what is observed in their daily perform, neither what the literature says.

2 METHODOLOGY

This Qualitative research adopts the Case Study as a method to explore a phenomenon that is relevant due to the impact it has in our context. Is well known that case studies involve the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting [6]. We decided to approach to the object of study under this methodology, because we considered that is the best to understand (in-depth) the problem [7] [8].

The universe of study is constituted by undergraduate or higher education students. The population is a group of students from a faculty that trains language teachers in one of the smallest cities of The Mexican Republic. The sample was limited to 12 subjects distributed as follows: seven graduates, in 2018, of the program in liquidation and five students who are enrolled in the current school year (2018-2019) at the eighth semester.

A semi-structured interview and two focus group sessions were applied [9]. To understand the subject in greater depth, a senior manager from the University of Colima was interviewed, under the same terms. Some field notes were taken at the time students talked in the focus group section. They were also considered, because they include the researcher's perspective of that moment. The records were carried out in audio-recordings and the analysis of the findings was made from the Grounded Theory [10] [11], with the support of ATLAS.ti® for mobile devices.
2.1 Our questions

A Quantitative study requires questions that guide the researchers to observe an object study focusing only in those aspects that were considered inside the boundaries of the case [6]. As was mentioned at the summary, we started the research with questions about issues such as dropping out and the role of teachers. They were stated as: What factors influence dropout? What is the role of teachers in this desertion scenario? And what is the position of the university authorities? The first one is the main question and the next two are subsidiary ones.

3 RESULTS

Friese affirms that CAQDAS (Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software) is transforming the way we treat our findings [12]. In our case, treating the findings from the best of both perspectives (manually and with software) is the best. After discussing 122 quotations and 113 codes at the ATLAS.ti platform and analyzing the subject’s responses from Charmaz’s coding processes (see table 1), it is possible to talk about the categories and the concepts generated from the subjects of study voices [10].

3.1 Analysis from Charmaz’s table

The following table is an example of the treatment of the findings. According to Charmaz, and in order to present an in-depth picture of the case, researchers must understand the subject’s voices [7]. In our case, we decided to analyze the three main reports, the transcripts from the interview, those from the recordings and the field notes. In the final interpretive phase, we were able to report the meaning of the case at the time we could understood the issues of the instrumental case of study [10]. Regardless of the type of university, many common causes may lead to students dropping studies at higher education levels. Some of problems may be related to personal issues and some others as a result of a mix of them (school-family-life style).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATA</th>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>CONCEPT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Students responses from the interview’s transcriptions. | Boring classes | Financial affairs | According to some students, at some point they realize they underestimate college costs (…)
| | Working half time | | |
| | Misunderstandings | Conflict with school, family and work commitments | |
| | “Don’t wanna be teacher” | Lack of Student’s engagement | |
| Transcripts of audio recordings (interview to a senior manager). | Hard subjects | Poor previous preparation | According to our subjects of study, the main reason why of students dropping out of college is (…)
| | Lack of flexibility | Failing classes | |
| | Expensive books | Lack of Student support | |
| | Not interested | | |
| | It’s my decision | | |
| Field notes from the focus group observation | No compromise | The major wasn’t student’s first choice | A simple way to express the reasons of leaving college was “because is boring” (…)
| | Absorber work | Student’s demotivation | |
| | Teacher’s disinterest | | |

3.1.1 Financial affairs

According to some students, at some point they realize they underestimate college costs. By that time, it was too late that they couldn’t find the way to get the funds to cover the college expenses. Others simply decided to be making money, working full time than pursuing the degree.

3.1.2 Conflict with school, family and work commitments

According to our subjects of study, the main reason why of students dropping out of college is this conflict of interest between school, the job and the family. We may say that this is also a financial
issue. This work and study situation have many other underlying problems. The participants in our study said that work contributed to the decision to drop out. They think that balancing work and school is stressful even for the strongest student.

3.1.3 Lack of Student’s engagement

A simple way to express the reasons of leaving college was “because is boring”. We could relate that issue to motivation and attribute the responsibility to students. But, according to what they expressed, they do not feel comfortable at the school environment in general. They also expressed that no one cared if they attend the classes or they do not. They identify that teachers have serious differences among them, and they have the feeling that, sometimes, teachers try to involve them as part of the conflict.

3.1.4 Poor previous preparation

Students, a group of them, discovered at certain point that they finished their previous studies underprepared. Among this group we can talk about students who drop out because they cannot keep up with coursework, they do not have a good English level or simply they have deficiency at reading and writing in the target language. Students also know the university is not an innocent victim. Since most of them came from high school they consider that the faculty can be doing more to help students succeed with the language affairs.

3.1.5 Failing classes

Failing classes is not about failing one class or two. Students feel overwhelmed when repeating courses of languages do not fit their level. To the overwhelming amount of piled up work, condensed in some semesters, students feel stressed and demotivated for additional reasons basically related to: A feeling that they are not up to become teachers of languages. Students struggle with paying up for extra school activities and materials (expensive books). They have strong feelings about their peers advancing ahead of them and they develop a sense of hopelessness. Finally, students feel that the program is not suited for them.

3.1.6 A feeling of lack of support

In our opinion, this is the strongest student's declaration and it is an issue that goes beyond the student's financial or motivational scenarios. That is something above the teacher's capacity and the difficulty of the program. This feeling involves the entire campus management model.

3.2 Grounded Theory analysis and ATLAS.ti

A complementary set of categories, some of them related to the mentioned above, emerged from the interview conducted with the educational coordinator of the University of Colima in Mexico.

3.2.1 Expectation versus reality

Referring to a group of students who had a misconception of what is the program about. Many of them came to the faculty with specific expectation on becoming professional translators, specialist in English language, to become interpreters, among others. Only a few had a clear idea about becoming teachers of languages. Frustration makes these students drop out college at any time.

3.2.2 Family and money affairs

The financial issues, due to the hard situation families in Mexico are facing, many college students have to stop studying and begin to work. Money affairs is causing students divide their time among those two activities and there is a time when work becomes their priority. Some students ask for scholarships, but they are good only for matriculation and they do not cover other costs like transportation and meals.

3.2.3 Quality of the teacher-student interaction

There is clear information that shows statistics about failing specific subjects. This type of abandonment is related to the professors, and with the way they conduct their classes. Data presented by the coordinator shows that students leave school because they could not fulfill the subject expectations. Finally, students feel that they are not important for their teachers. Careless teachers promote demotivation and the potential dropping out.
4 CONCLUSIONS

The results are preliminary, but conclusive. Students have expectation but reality is totally opposite to what they wanted. According to the findings, students entered the program wanting to learn the language, but not to become teachers of languages. They wanted to study English to travel around the world and students do not like the pedagogical or didactic subjects and some of them expressed that learning a third language (French), as mandatory subject, is complicated. Finally, some of them mentioned the family and money affairs, in several cases, students have to work to support their own expense since their parents don’t want to invest more money in their sons’ education.

Perhaps, the most relevant aspect to consider is the teachers’ role. Students demand that their professors and authorities show authentic interest in them and to listen to their needs. Those students who remain at school manifest that they were about dropping out at some point of their career.

The study has met its objective, 1) Expectation versus reality, it means that students entered the program with expectations of traveling around the world and being interpreters or translators, when the reality is that their professional performance will be as language teachers. A group of students affirmed, in a convincing way, that they do not like the subjects of the pedagogical area. 2) Family and money affairs, another reason why the career is abandoned is for family and / or economic matters. 3) Quality of the teacher-student interaction, in this sense, the students state that their professors and authorities show little interest, or the interest for them is null.

Additionally, the participants expressed the reasons that have made them stay in the program. Those subjects that have already graduated, manifest what they consider made them finish their undergraduate studies. The study has met its objective, partially, it is expected to deepen into other factors and a larger student population. partially, it is expected to deepen into other factors and a larger student population.

We want to finish our conclusions with Sagenmüller reflections:

Before leaving school, students go through a reflective process, and they may be seeking help somewhere. When they cannot find that, they enter a loophole of feelings and sensations: isolation, frustration, a loss of self-esteem, disconnection, confusion, until they decide to give up.

This is just some factors that could affect dropout rates. Your university may find other important ones. However, regardless of the reasons, the most important solution to this problem to address in a timely manner these underlying problems.

If that does not happen, it’s not just about the student failing the school: the school is definitely failing the student [13].

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REFERENCES


