Teaching from the Cracks: A Year in a Rural School

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Graduating from an English Pedagogy Program in Chile is often accompanied by the hopeful discourse that frames teachers as an agent of change. I, too, believed in that ideal, convinced that through English teaching I could promote intercultural respect and support meaningful learning processes (Freire, 1998)—especially in marginalized contexts. Yet the leap from university to a rural, intercultural classroom revealed tensions largely absent from textbooks: inequality, bureaucracy, and a profound disconnection between educational policy and territorial needs.

These words emerge from that fissure—the cracks where ideals meet reality, where teachers must invent new ways of sustaining hope. Through this reflection, I aim to examine the challenges of teaching in rural and intercultural contexts, to question the structural conditions of the Chilean education system, and to rethink what it means to resist pedagogically within the cracks.

My first year as an English teacher began in a rural intercultural school in southern Chile. From the start, teaching in the classroom revealed deep contrasts: students with ancestral knowledge and strong community ties confronted a state-imposed curriculum disconnected from their lived reality (Quilaqueo, Quintriqueo, & Torres, 2016). Teaching English was not merely about grammar—it meant seeking points of contact between languages, identities, and memories. However, besides these cultural tensions, I soon faced material precariousness: cold classrooms, poor internet access, scarce resources, and fragmented schedules. More painful than this scarcity was the structural neglect. Discourses of inclusion and interculturality felt hollow when practices were still monocultural, ignoring linguistic diversity and Indigenous ways of learning (Sánchez & Madrid, 2019). As Walsh (2009) notes, including without assimilating means valuing difference as a pedagogical strength and resisting the coloniality embedded in school structures.

In such contexts, the teacher's role extends far beyond lesson planning and evaluation. It means mediating, creating from scarcity, offering emotional support, responding to families' distrust in the system, and meeting institutional demands often detached from reality. English, far from being a tool for mobility, often appeared as a strange, imposed obligation (Zembylas, 2018). Students were willing to learn, but the system rarely allowed them to do so in their own place, voice, and rhythm.

Teaching in rural schools also exposes structural failures of the Chilean education system. Institutional fragmentation—schools managed by municipalities, SLEPs, or private providers—generates bureaucracy and uncertainty. Many providers prioritize enrollment figures over children's interests, deepening the gap between institutional decisions and community needs. This is compounded by an accountability logic grounded in standardized assessments such as SIMCE (Falabella, 2016), which ignore realities such as multigrade classrooms, linguistic diversity, and discontinuous trajectories. Such measures impoverish assessment and sideline creativity, expression, and emotion.

Furthermore, education has become increasingly commodified. The language of efficiency, performance, and competitiveness permeates classrooms and teacher education alike. Programs are outsourced, services privatized, and projects implemented to meet administrative rather than pedagogical goals. The teacher is often reduced to an executor of instructions, pressured to meet objectives in which they had no voice (Oteíza & Pinuer, 2019).

Sustaining a pedagogical practice with a social purpose thus becomes an act of resistance. It means asking daily how to teach without reproducing systemic violence, how to assess without punishing, how to include without assimilating. As Gómez and Gómez (2021) and Hooks (1994) suggest, teaching can be an act of freedom only if it challenges authoritarian practices that oppress both students and teachers.

In sum, teaching from the cracks highlights not only the distance between educational ideals and rural realities but also the possibility of pedagogical resistance in the everyday, in every act of connection, in each moment when learning defies neglect. This experience reaffirms that teaching with a social purpose is countercultural, yet indispensable for imagining education as a practice of freedom.

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