

Concept Paper

Reflections for Transforming the Perspectives of Teacher-Directed Practices towards Community-Based Ethnographic Practices with Migrant and Minority Students

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Abstract: This conceptual paper represents the retrospective/current reflections and findings from teacher education research of an intercultural educator gathered over 45 years of research in country-specific schools. Considered are the perspectives of primary and secondary school teachers who teach migrant/minority students and who are influenced by national policies which expose them to new local intercultural classroom practices. Its intent is to question the use of homogenized teacher-directed practices that not only essentialize these students' traditions, customs, cultures, religions, and languages but also project a deficit model in classrooms which minimalizes their contributions. Proposed is the deconstruction of homogenized, rigid teacher-directed practices arising from their professional training, classroom teaching, and pedagogy, towards community-based ethnographic (CBE) practices so that teachers, students, and ethnographers can immerse themselves in classroom participatory inquiry and critical thinking that unpacks students' lives and creates dialogical processes that identify, utilize, and legitimize local "funds of knowledge". By implementing a CBE approach, a more realistic understanding of the educational contexts, experiences, and perspectives of migrant/minority students and their teachers can be identified to develop interculturally laden learning activities and content that concretely address diversity.

Keywords: perspectives; contextualization; reflections; teacher-directed practices; community-based ethnographic practices; minorities; migrants



Citation: Montero-Sieburth, M. Reflections for Transforming the Perspectives of Teacher-Directed Practices towards Community-Based Ethnographic Practices with Migrant and Minority Students. *Societies* **2023**, *13*, 189. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13080189>

Academic Editors: Nektaria Palaiologou and Achilleas Kostoulas

Received: 1 June 2023

Revised: 27 July 2023

Accepted: 6 August 2023

Published: 14 August 2023



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1. Introduction

This conceptual paper represents the retrospective and current reflections of an intercultural educator gathered over 45 years of research in country-specific schools and focuses on the perspectives of primary and secondary school teachers who teach migrant/minority students¹ influenced by national country policies and exposed to new local intercultural classroom practices.

Such reflections criticize the rigidity of teacher education research in situating such students in the classroom, in terms of the contexts, perspectives, and experiences they may have from their homes and sending countries. Assuming that directed practices are the starting point for learning tends to homogenize their teaching by following required policies in lockstep fashion and by interpreting policy goals at a national or state level as "truths".

Proposed instead is a transformation of these practices towards community-based ethnographic practices which emerge from inquiry practices, research, and documentation by teachers, ethnographers, and students themselves. Compared to teacher-directed practices which tend to essentialize the cultures and languages of migrant and minority students under a deficit explanation, CBE counteracts the one-size-fits-all teacher-directed practices by focusing on the diversity of students from their own cultural perspective and from research initiated in classrooms. In this process, perspectives (worldviews, beliefs, and value systems), quotidian everyday life (connections, places, relationships, identities,

habits, and codes of conduct), and ways of knowing are amalgamated as enriching learning practices for all students.

The rationale for advancing community-based ethnographic practices is based on the author's four-decade research in U.S., Latin American, Spanish, and Dutch schools, where patterns of inequality and social injustices are evident and findings of well-intended teachers employing intercultural education and following diversity and inclusion policy protocols indicate migrant and minority students experience limited opportunities for their educational advancement [1]. The situated contexts that migrant and minority students experience, their perspectives on schooling, their interpretations of intercultural learning, as well as household folk ways of knowing tend to be disregarded.

Teachers tend not to problematize the social, cultural, and economic issues affecting the lives of migrant and minority students. Despite the diversity of their students and the heterogeneity of their classrooms, they focus on the practical and do not often link these students' issues to decolonial critiques of diversity—the role of power, racial relations, social hierarchies, and inequitable distributions of privilege [2,3].

To deconstruct teacher-directed practices, the situated state of teacher requirements drawn from teacher education research is discussed, introducing the need for community-based ethnographic practices, and advancing teacher research in classrooms as the means to transform such practices.

1.1. Situatedness of Teacher-Directed Practices

Worldwide research by Darling-Hammond (2012) indicates that teachers are expected to teach all children, irrespective of their backgrounds, languages, religions, or cultures, the most available and updated knowledge, information, and skills to attain the optimal learning experiences in classrooms [4]. Teachers not only need to show evidence of learning by testing and evaluating the performance of students as part of their professionalization, but proficiency in their given subject matter and skill in identifying the needs of students that engage and challenge them cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally [5]. Moreover, teachers need to work out the grade equivalencies, the correspondence of their previous educational experiences with their class, the cultural norms and practices they have been exposed to, and the influence of the parents' educational backgrounds on the proficiency level of their students.

Such demands are often filtered through educational policies generated from national or state-level settings, with the expectation that they will be interpreted and implemented adequately at the classroom level [6]. To deal with such diversity and heterogeneity in their classrooms, teachers require a degree of intercultural educational training and development of cultural competences and intercultural dialogue to transition these students smoothly into their new environments [7].

Learning to balance these demands and enable teachers and students alike to engender positive interactions and cultural exchanges is contingent upon multiple factors including (1) the teacher's ability to reflect on their practice and their own positionality with regard to others, (2) the existing and enduring relationships that teachers develop with students and parents, and (3) the establishment of a classroom climate as a site of mediation, confidence building, and growth which ensures a safe, nurturing, and developmentally grounded classroom (essential according to this author) [8].

If the intercultural training they undergo is also imbued within the framework of national policies leading to prescriptive learning, teachers may rely on their actual classroom teaching using the fundamental teacher-directed learning practices they gained through their university programs, teacher training, and foundation courses, for expediency.

Guided by these educational policies, theories, and practices, neophyte pre-service teachers test and experiment with activities and content. As they become mature seasoned practitioners teaching diverse populations, they convert these into a cadre of knowledge, skills, and tools which are tested and evidence-based, requiring not only the attainment of student's academic results with performance outcomes, class discussions, examinations,

and quizzes, but also teachers' prescriptive directed practices. Over time, these practices become consolidated into an exalted normative homogenous core of what is worth teaching.

It is assumed that these universal teacher-directed practices are operational for all students of different ages, backgrounds, and aptitudes based on the fact that students who effectively engage and complete tasks can be progressively transitioned by teachers. These actions become the "banking" process described by Paulo Freire, where teachers deposit knowledge into students, which they repeat and memorize as learning [9]. Such transmission of knowledge functions as an input and output factor—a cause-effect of students following teacher-initiated objectives, to produce specific and concrete outcomes.

1.2. Author's Own Research

The author's research shows that migrant or minority students¹ do not readily respond to such teacher-directed practices given their schooling backgrounds, language use, values, norms, and home environments [10,11]. The assumption that all students who enter classrooms as migrants or minority students already understand the institutional demands for integration and adaptation through intercultural education policies is more about homogenization than heterogeneity, promoting a one-size-fits all monocultural ideology.

The contexts vary, but for minority students, exposure to learning may be dependent on different ways of knowing and teaching, disparities in their home life, manner of speaking, and interpretive perspectives, making it hard to fulfil the expectations and professional perspectives of teachers' practice [12]. For migrant students, being exposed to different national educational systems and demographic influences means that intercultural understanding of interaction, inclusion, or integration experiences may be challenging in a new context. Intercultural education does not necessarily achieve the same aim when a student is transferred from one context to another.

In some countries, as is the case in the U.S.A., teaching students about cultural differences to understand the "other" is a primary policy goal but results in the targeting of the students' ethnicity. In Mexico, bilingual education, framed as intercultural education, is used as a springboard into the mainstream. In Costa Rica and Spain, intercultural education advances dialogue and fosters co-existence of natives with foreigners, while social justice, critical thinking, and human rights strategies are specified and encouraged in intercultural education in the Netherlands [13]. Knowing what the intended goal of intercultural education is in relation to what students know is essential for situating minority and incoming or newcomer students.

Students need to effectively gain knowledge and learn skills to interpret and operationalize these educational goals with strategies that lead them not only to appreciate others but to understand language shifts and to problematize and critically identify social, cultural, and political issues. Yet most teachers, who categorize students by race, culture, language, and ethnicity, do not know how the funds of knowledge—the accumulated histories of families and households which are culturally significant—make up the "home" knowledge of students and form their identity [14].

Research on early school leaving suggests that the perspectives of teachers and their expectations are highly correlated with a student's disengagement and the decision to leave school, fail a grade, or drop out of school [15]. Teachers are one of the most significant reasons for students to stay in schools.

Given the array of issues teachers face, and the demands placed upon them, community-based ethnographic research of their classrooms may present teachers with an opportunity to gain closer appreciation of the realities of their classrooms.

Derived from Dell Hymes' initial "ethnographic monitoring", a progressive process not only for gathering data but sharing and enacting data has been integrated into the field of community-based ethnography (CBE). Ethnographers consult members of the learning community to (a) identify the issues of concern to them, (b) observe behaviors in contexts and document such processes, (c) share the findings with the community, listen to the feedback and suggestions provided, and (d) take stock of the process itself, assuring the

needs of the learning community are being met [16]. Such findings provide significant data that allow the learning community to respond and to enact change.

It is then feasible for teachers to become researchers of their own classrooms by using CBE, since it allows them to immerse themselves in the cultures and languages of migrant and minority students and use dialogical, participatory inquiry and critical thinking processes that identify, utilize, and legitimize students' everyday lives and funds of knowledge.

Collaborative research by teachers and students in tandem with an "ethnographer"² helps to answer and prioritize the "burning questions" that become research questions and drives the design of a study carried out by the class. The practices that emerge from such research are valuable because they reflect the culture of the entire classroom, not only the migrant and minority students.

Teachers who make the change to CBE practices will be able to: (1) identify the different perspectives of migrant and minority students in relation to others; (2) contextualize the learning of these students and their funds of knowledge; (3) characterize the intercultural experiences and understanding students bring from their home and native countries to the host country, shaped by different local, social, cultural, and national contexts; (4) analyze how these students incorporate the principles of intercultural education to which they are exposed; and (5) appreciate the research of teachers as practitioners as an understudied area in migrant research which deserves to be recognized.

2. Methods

To gain insight into how CBE provides alternative ways of teaching migrant and minority students, aside from using the general tenets of qualitative research, including an ethnographic approach with shadowing, in-depth interviews, focus groups, mapping, field notes, photography, and videos where applicable, the areas of CBE in need of consideration are specifically described and note 3 refers to caveats about its use³.

In each of the research projects conducted by the author, rigor in the submission of informed consent as well as university ethical requirements have all been met.

During the past 30 years, with migrants and minorities in diverse contexts, the author has integrated Hymes' teachings into her research. Starting with the "burning issues" of participants, the research consisting of pairs and teams aimed to find answers to those issues, using collaborative and participatory research based on the "effective communication and practical use of findings" represented in field reports and co-written investigations [17].

Community-based ethnography (CBE), in observing behaviors in multiple contexts, creates opportunities for partners to negotiate, collaborate, contest each other, and create new ideas towards change. Hymes reiterated that "... if we want "school people" to be more observant as participants then we must become more participating as observers" [18] (p. 321). Van der Aa and Blommaert argue his use of language "... is not just an opportunity for speakers but often also a problem, a constraint; and ... basic sociolinguistic issues such as the distribution of linguistic and narrative resources have to be part of any ethnographic inquiry" [18] (p. 320).

Hymes' ethnographic research in education in 2011, maintain Van der AA and Blommaert, is relevant today because it addresses: (a) voice as expressed by students and teachers and that all teaching starts where the child is; (b) maintains long-term commitments and relationship building with participants; (c) acknowledges "knowledge from and for the people" as the democratic knowledge of schools; (d) promotes comparative and contrastive case studies of schools that can be analyzed as cumulative at the microlevel, cooperative at the mesolevel, and comparative at the macrolevel [18]. Initially begun as a program, Hymes' ethnographic monitoring became a project and finally a democratic tool in which participants research with ethnographers and own the process of change.

In that regard, CBE has become the *modus operandi* of this author's research, presented in a selection of case-history capsules that consider the burning questions faced by teachers and students against the backdrop of prevailing intercultural education policies.

During the mid-1980s, in attempting to understand the educational failure of Latino students mostly depicted through quantitative studies that compared them to their White counterparts in greater metropolitan Boston schools, the author and graduate assistants collected data starting with questions that came from the students in an urban ethnically mixed high school.

What reasons do Latino students give about their successes or challenges in schools? And under what conditions do they leave school or become disincen-
tivated in learning?

The sample consisted of a dozen high-school Latino male and female students and 30+ bilingual and regular teachers who were observed and followed for the duration of a school year, through shadowing, in- and out-of-school interviews, visits to students' homes, producing the data that were reported back to the school.

The findings showed that simply speaking Spanish and not English placed most of these students at risk of failure, according to the majority of their teachers, except for the two Latino teachers in school. Even when Latino students felt they could succeed by studying after school, as undocumented students they could not continue to college, and some planned to drop out before completing high school [19].

The author's CBE research in Costa Rica during the late 1980s focused on the equitable distribution of education in a marginal urban school in San Jose, which had a strong intercultural education platform. A team of 4 other researchers, who had been trained in qualitative research by the author, observed classrooms of teachers throughout a first year in an attempt to answer the following question:

What can teachers who have undergone intercultural education do to enable urban marginal students to have educational opportunities that advance their learning?

This 1-year study became a 10-year study, in which the team observed all of the 20 classroom teachers using participatory research of this primary school, observing, documenting, and providing feedback at the end. Their findings emphasized that teachers needed to be retrained to understand student backgrounds. They were encouraged to use choral responses and terms of endearment to control the classrooms and eventually produced a collaborative curriculum which matched the students' interests with the teachers' professional development. The study was not only institutionalized in similar schools throughout Costa Rica but became a published article [20].

Since 2006 to the present, the author's research has focused on diverse schools in Spain and the Netherlands.

In Tenerife, Spain, based on the case of the 12 Dominican students, 9 males and 3 females and their 12 parents, who were shadowed, followed, and interviewed during the duration of a year, in and out of school and at social events, the research questions were:

Does the background and language of the Dominican students enable them to enter at the same level as other Latin American and African students and be able to achieve in schools?

How responsive are Spanish teachers to the academic needs of Dominican students?

Intercultural education in Spain has been modeled after American approaches, influenced by Sonia Nieto and James Banks, and Teresa Aguado has advanced the field with extensive teacher-training programs directed at tolerance and cultural diversity as critical perspectives. Yet, the author's study in the Canary Islands (2006–2007) on teachers' perspectives of intercultural education showed window-shopping portrayals based on race by teachers of intercultural education, particularly of Dominican youth [21], and lack of teacher awareness of discriminatory practices in classrooms.

While these studies show that CBE uses the same traditional research design sequence, requiring data collection, reduction, and analysis of findings, areas where CBE requires particular attention are: (a) negotiating entry, which is variable and at the same time continuous; (b) moving from burning questions to research questions, in assuring a solid

partnership and prioritization of questions to drive the research design with time commitments and dispositions; (c) training of participants in methodologies so they can fully participate and share responsibilities; (d) monitoring of congruent findings for approval of the draft report and final report by collaborators; (e) use of the final report as a template for developing action plans with defined evaluation measures of progress towards plans for change able to be institutionalized in classrooms and schools.

3. Findings

Evident from these studies are several findings on the significance of (1) the perspectives of teachers and students, (2) a Global North and Global South perspective of intercultural education experienced by migrant and minority students, and (3) the importance of teacher research.

Aside from its methodological contributions, CBE also is about theory building and creating a heuristic process. Interpreting the reality of classrooms means identifying the perspectives that teachers trained in intercultural education have of their migrant or minority students and how they understand their real-life situations within diverse classrooms. It also means identifying the teachers' implicit thinking—what they hold as significant but may not be overtly stated—as well as their explicit actions and activities in what they teach, situating and contextualizing learning practices.

The beliefs, actions, and motivations embraced by teachers and those shared by migrant and minority students who may derive their viewpoints from the funds of knowledge and everyday experiences at home and in their neighborhoods may be quite different.

Conveying the perspectives of teachers and their interpretation of intercultural educational goals at the national, local, or international levels through the implementation that takes place in the classroom can only be validated by the perspectives and dialogical responses of students. Migrant and minority students' perspectives tend to be understood when their behaviors, expressions, motivations, and relationships with each other, peers, and teachers can be described in and out of school contexts.

The transfer of multicultural and intercultural approaches from the Global North into educational programs of the Global South, particularly with the spread of globalization and the widespread growth of neoliberal economic policies, have influenced and blurred borders [22]. Thus, research conducted in the Global North and the Global South on the importance of national policies and intercultural education being taught influencing the perspectives of teachers and shaping students, as well as clarity on the type of multicultural or intercultural approach being proposed, needs to be questioned.

Depending on the intercultural education perspective that they studied under before migrating, migrant children from Mexico attending schools in the U.S.A. may need to be transitioned into U.S. intercultural education and its different approaches.

Incumbent on teachers is knowledge about the goals of intercultural education in Mexico which have been based on the understanding of the 'other', centered on highlighting social class and economic differences that persist today between the dominant middle-class mainstream populations and the indigenous, urban, and rural poor. There is an understanding that the goals of intercultural education in public schools in Indigenous areas are focused on teaching bilingual education, since learning Spanish via native languages not only serves to integrate poor and indigenous students, but also educates and helps them enter into the mainstream supported by a strong nationalistic perspective of indigenous identity.

Today, such goals have shifted under President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's Fourth Transformation⁴ and include quality of rights in a highly socio-economically differentiated society. Teachers are currently being trained in the use of free school textbooks which use community-based learning projects to provide marginalized, poor, and indigenous students the opportunity to learn from the bottom up, supported by their teachers.

In contrast, Costa Rica's intercultural education perspective, initially directed at the integration of migrants, notably Nicaraguans, Central, and South Americans, focuses now

on social justice, human rights, and ecological and democratic action. Yet, Costa Rica since the 1970s has fostered a strong gender-balanced educational trajectory [23]. With its strong democratic leaning, between the 1980s and 1990s it employed an intercultural education program directed at demographic, social, and economic differences among its populations and most recently, due to the growing influx of migrants, many of whom are transiting northward and suffer from psychosocial problems of school discrimination, has developed intercultural education guidelines to overcome ethnocentrism, provide critical thinking, and develop open-mindedness towards cultural diversity, goals that may surpass those of other countries [24].

Research by the author since 2008 to the present has traced the changes in intercultural education perspectives in the Netherlands from a focus on tolerance at the national level to decentralization which operates at the community level. Individuals are expected today to self-integrate through civic actions, and teachers are expected to expand learning opportunities using cooperative and project-based learning [25]

Second-generation Turkish Dutch high-school students have shown adaptation, leading them to develop hybrid identities, at times identifying with a teacher of their own ethnic background, and in other cases experiencing fluid existences [26,27].

In undertaking CBE, there is a need to first deconstruct one's perspective (where one is coming from) within a socially constructed context in which learning is situated. How we see the world, what that worldview means, the beliefs held, and the values sustained are all referential points about perspective and its influences. Second, the contexts of home and school need also to be deconstructed in providing social and cultural meanings for students, and in getting at the perspectives of teachers and students, the context of schools needs to be deconstructed, and classrooms need to be researched for their unique cultures.

From these findings, there is an evident need to move away from asking teacher-directed research questions to asking questions of teachers and students to research. As a community of learners, assessing the prior knowledge teachers have of migrants and/or minorities and the perspectives they share, whether in directing students to "fit" into the educational system or start where they are, exploring and engaging in the meaningful aspects of their everyday lives, and recognizing their networks of friends, peers, parents, and caring helpers changes their perspective. Such explorations help identify concrete ways of knowing and understanding, of interpreting reality, of learning, and of deconstructing notions and labels in favor of the words, interpretations, and meanings contributed by teachers and students.

4. Conclusions

Based on the author's research, this paper has argued for a fundamental change in teacher-directed practices in favor of CBE practices because the former tend to consider the traditions, customs, cultures, languages, and religions of migrant and minority students as token descriptions rather than a rich and vital source of teacher-student interaction whereby genuine learning about the "other" takes place, fostering student dialogue and optimizing educational outcomes.

CBE encourages teachers to re-evaluate their generalized assumptions of migrant students and to recognize and understand the knowledge base and perspectives of migrant students coming from educational systems in their own countries, to help them cope with intercultural practices in the host county. For example, teachers need to understand that introducing students from Mexico in the context of the Global North without recognizing transferable assets such as their *Mestizaje*, blended backgrounds, or home cultural traditions and rituals may disincentivize them from integrating and belonging. Likewise for minority students, whose family situations may be quite different from the school's perspective, the need to identify their folk ways of knowing becomes relevant.

By working in teams with students and peers in "doing and learning" from each other, the CBE practice fosters dialogical interactions that nurture the students' sense of well-being and inclusion. Teachers practicing CBE open new panoramas in dealing

with parents by understanding how the household structure and rituals underscore the meanings students bring to school, making the ties and values between the school and the home more congruent.

From such research, different ideas on the types of teaching that can be enacted and the content and activities that emerge can readily be put into practice by teachers to serve all of their students. Upon completing the research, identifiable concepts and doable activities can be used as springboards for developing the learning content of the class with formative and summative evaluations and the assessment of the responses students, teachers, and parents make to the content, being streamlined into learning. Instead of assuming that prescriptive teaching can bridge the varied cultures of students, teachers who use CBE practices can uncover diverse and interculturally laden types of learning and “funds of knowledge” which help them access unknown ways of learning. Such learning may also require finding connections or solutions to dilemmas that incite students to further investigate.

By engaging in CBE, teachers can observe the interactions that occur in covering curriculum content, identify the adequacy in sequencing of learning by detecting the readiness on the part of all students, and identify different types of assessment (portfolio, storytelling, portraits) to evaluate students’ academic progress. More importantly, the responses of students and how they are acknowledged and accepted by the teacher and peers can be recognized [28].

The convergence of teachers’ perspectives and students’ perspectives begins with listening to each other’s questions, as a means to create curiosity, towards dialogue and eventually critical thinking, allowing for decolonial critiques to arise and be discussed within sociopolitical contexts.

Clearly, the research cited in this paper attests the critical need for teachers to reach beyond prescriptive teaching methods and become avid researchers of their classrooms and to uncover the funds of knowledge brought by migrant and minority students, along with that of their mainstream counterparts. Converting that knowledge into useful activities and materials that display the students’ abilities to create their own curriculum with teachers helping navigate their possibilities creates enormous potential to optimize their educational outcomes.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: For all of the studies conducted over the past 45 years, submission of proposals for research at the university or government agency level has undergone rigorous institutional review board scrutiny, with approval of submission of ethical procedures to diverse ethics committees and production under exempt status.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the studies conducted.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Migrant student refers to the children of first-generation immigrants who have moved from their place of residence within a country or across international borders, temporarily or permanently and are in primary or secondary education, while immigrant students are considered to have permanently moved. Minority student refers to students who are not in the majority racial or ethnic group and may experience discrimination that affects their educational achievement and advancement.
- ² Researchers in community-based ethnography (CBE) become self-reflexive, self-critical in their right and positionality to intervene and become co-members with participants in the process.
- ³ In using CBE, these are some caveats to be considered: (a) the need for much latitude given particularly to the negotiation of entry, quality of data, adequate transcription of the data, training of participants, and the interpretation and representation of data. (b) Negotiation of entry can always be varied in cases where access to sensitive data or ethnically based issues may be difficult. (c) Data need to be collected within the confines of a country’s policies for accessing schools, and schools may refuse the research because they experienced being overstudied or not adequately represented. (d) The quality of the data is important, particularly

if there are no substantive data, even messy data, for interpreting all data sources. (e) Teachers' individual interpretations of intercultural education may depart from the school's expected policy implementation and become their own approach; thus, openness to the variability of reported data and data analysis needs to be considered. (f) Management of time, pacing teams, and counting on the cooperation and support of all stakeholders especially when linking policy to actual practice. (g) The training of participants requires accessing their funds of knowledge to parallel the academic knowledge being transmitted by some of the methodologies. (h) Gaining the confidence and trust of teachers, as well as the building of relationships over time, especially as outsiders and not insiders. (i) Agreement on the findings and their reporting by all of the collaborators requires much finesse. (j) To assure validity, the whole process needs to show that the relationship of the research question to conceptualization and methodology is supported, and that the outcomes can readily be put into practice by others.

- ⁴ The fourth transformation refers to the change of political regime proposed by Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador in 2018 based on changes in economic policies to end the neoliberal paradigm of previous governments, fostering social policies to provide greater coverage of the population using fewer resources, the end of corruption as an entrenched structural system, and promoting republican austerity.

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