

Curriculum: Mirror and reflection of the daily life of schools

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Abstract

This project is part of a narrative research that questions the factors that contribute to a valued teacher identity, this being the teacher recognised by the school and the educational community as a professional to look up to. The study begins with an inquiry into the ways of narrating and understanding the teaching career, which emerge from the biographical account of three female teachers, who have been teaching for more than two decades in the Oporto area. The three life stories enable us to understand the relationships established between teachers, students and school but also how the individual experiences and their contexts obtain meaning while reconstructing the life story. Furthermore, the discourses obtained allow us to understand the curriculum historically and politically since early 50s to nowadays. Through their biographical account we perceive both an overview of Portuguese and English teaching methodology and curriculum and how they affect everyday life at school. This communication will explore the need of curriculum to function both as a mirror and a window, in order to reflect and reveal the world of the student. If the student is understood as a dwelling self, the curriculum needs to enable him/her to look through the window in order to see the realities of others and into mirrors in order to see his/her own reality reflected. Knowing the window and the mirror is essential to a balanced education that engages everyone involved in a great conversation which will lead to the success of the student.

Keywords: narrative research; teacher identity; curriculum studies.

1 Introduction

This exploratory study aims to address the factors that contribute to a valued teacher identity. Therefore, through biographical narrative we seek to understand a form of knowledge that interprets the educational reality. We acknowledge that teachers are and have been students and the schools where they work are both learning and training spaces. In these spaces, teachers teach with their experience, with specific knowledge of their discipline and with the interpersonal relationships previously established with the other members of the educational community.

At schools, teachers also take on the role of students during their supervised teaching practice. Usually, this process takes a year and, during this year, teachers face a conflict between what they have learned during the initial training and the effective practice of the profession. Consequently, the initial exercise of teaching is understood as knowledge to unfold, both by individuals and by the school community, which organizes and manages the training process.

Recent bibliographical studies on teachers allow us to look at autobiographical narratives, recognizing the importance of the places where teacher training is developed and the interaction of personal and collective stories in schools. These theories enable us to recognize teacher training as a dialectical process where teachers are constructed as subjects through their actions and experience held in socialization. Therefore, professional identity emerges from the relationship of the teacher with the contexts of initial training and curriculum itself, the latter representing a culture and mediating the relationship between school and society and between theory and practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1988).

2 Teaching Identity and Initial Teaching Practice

Teacher identity as an object of study dates back to the 80's and it is based on the importance of individual recognition and the recognition of another, in an interpersonal design. According to Erikson (1976), identity is constructed simultaneously on the individual's perception of himself, with reference to perceptions about others and



of others about himself, but it is also constructed on the social context in which it appears. Consequently, it is pertinent to study the construction of identity in face of new working conditions, as schools are experiencing a crisis caused by social factors. The crisis is reflected on pressure and tension between and on teachers, who are called to deal with new educational policies, students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, global economic changes, among others, all of which affect the school institution and translate into its decline (Dubet, 2002). To study a concept, such as teacher identity, it is necessary to perceive it in terms of its positioning in different historical times, given that the concepts are not neutral (Foucault, 1975).

As it is widely recognised, the initial training of teachers is a complex field, as it establishes relationships between scientific and educational intervention in the classroom. In this work, initial training is understood as the beginning of a process, institutionally framed and formal, of preparation and development of the person in order to get professional achievement in a school serving a society historically placed. This study field becomes even more complex if we take into consideration Portugal and the successive reforms that took place during and after its dictatorship. This time interval is adopted because it is where the subjects who participated in this study are at school and later at college.

Nowadays, teacher training cannot rely on models that were followed when the purpose of the school was to reproduce the existing knowledge and a culture, both considered unique. It is, however, relevant that a brief foray is made in the initial formation of our country. Between 1950 and 1964, national education was portrayed as under-performing, with a high rate of illiteracy in accordance with a reduced school attendance and lack of teachers, facilities and equipment. To cope with this terrifying scenario, far distant from European levels, education became a cornerstone in the process of rebuilding the state and took its part on the debate about modernization and development of the country. It is Veiga Simão, the minister for Education at the time, who points out that schools most in need of a reform were Universities as they were reduced to playing the role of preparing school teachers to teach secondary education. For the minister however, the specific mission of Universities would be to train scientists and technicians. Thus, in 1971, Veiga Simão introduced two reform projects aiming to expand education, particularly through greater equality of opportunity in terms of access, resulting in the expansion of basic education, the reintegration of preschool education in the organizational chart of national education, and the relevance given to adult education. Moreover, education was perceived as the engine of economic and social development.

The 80's continued with the educational reform movement and the country found itself grappling with a shortage of teachers. In 1986, it was diagnosed that 46.4% of 3rd cycle teachers were not professionalized, as most of them had their own qualification. This led to an effort to promote professionalization during service (Esteves, 2007). It is important to note that during this decade, post-revolution teachers acquire an enormous symbolic power because there is the belief in the potential of school to promote transformation and social progress (Nóvoa, 1995).

The Law on the Education System was approved by Law no. 46/86 of 14 October and subsequently amended in 1997, introducing the nine-year compulsory education and undergraduate studies as a necessary qualification for all teachers. This should encompass three components: the formation of personal, social, cultural, scientific, technical or artistic competences; pedagogical competences; and, finally, a component of pedagogic practice. There are common aspects to the activity of any teacher, whatever the level of education, but there are also specific aspects that must be taken into account, for instance, the specific objectives of each level of education and age characteristics of the school population that a teacher is called to teach. The teacher should also acquire training in other areas of knowledge beyond their specialty. This is justified given the complexity of the learning process, its multifaceted nature, the growing multiculturalism in schools, and the multiplicity of functions and tasks necessary in educational institutions (e.g., the definition of the school project, problem diagnosis) requiring, for an adequate professional performance.

The decades of experience of teacher training and educational research in Portugal show that it cannot be reduced to its academic dimension, but must include a component of reflective practice. Only this component allows the recognition of the key aspects of the field work needed for professional practice and provides training experiences that stimulate the mobilization and integration of knowledge and problem solving by providing future teachers opportunities to develop their abilities through observation and intervention. This essential element of initial teacher training was reflected in many models of training in Portugal, not only by teaching practice (with a duration of one year), but also by other disciplines during the academic degree that allowed direct contact with problems of professional practice. Moreover, one cannot ignore that all acts of teaching have political implications and is one of the goals of the teacher to boost students to engage in acting so that reduces the harmful effects of inequality in school and in society. The teacher has a social responsibility (Lopes, 2002) and should be a reflective practitioner, aware of the tacit knowledge, which often do not is expressed (Zeichner, 1993).



3 Method

The method used in this work was narrative inquiry promoting a qualitative research. Unlike more traditional methods, narrative inquiry successfully captures personal and human dimensions that cannot be quantified into facts and numerical data.

The instruments for data collection used were oral history (teachers tell their personal story and professional relationship with the social, economic, family, school, ...), photographs and other personal artefacts (set of materials from personal and professional life that allow the memory of the experience), semi-structured interviews about the issues that most interested the researchers; conversations where they would speak freely about the issues, field notes and other stories from the field, and an identification questionnaire, which primary objective was to clarify dates relevant to the study.

The relationship established between researchers and subjects is one of co-collaboration and data analysis refers to emerging categories, whose coding comes at a later time, leading to a qualitative approach. In short, life stories always have an intermediary that assumes a multiplicity of functions. Its purpose is not only to incite narration, but also coordinate and moderate the discussion. To assume the duties of the researcher, a script has been crafted, one that sets out some issues that we wish to see addressed, while leaving the party at liberty to share, to stretch in a particular topic and/or commenting. As a consequence, individual and researcher are partners in a dialectical relationship.

3.1 Participants

This exploratory study involved three teachers, Lia, Maria Teresa and Rosa Maria, whose career has developed in recent years in two schools in the district of Porto. They teach Portuguese and English, they are active participants in research groups at their schools and they have been supervisors of teaching practice for more than ten years.

3.2 Results

The early professional life of our participants starts on the decade of 70, however, only Lia and Maria Teresa became teachers in this period. This coincided precisely with the years in which the defence of education became the hallmark of Portuguese society and a period of great educational changes due to the dictatorship. Therefore, we are faced with constant curriculum changes, mirroring the changes of the country and enabling both students and teachers to see through the window of opportunities brought up by the new society.

Even though, their university years bring us a new perspective of the turmoil lived in Portugal, their early education depicts us, the learner, as subordinated and silent because the curriculum is not a window to new opportunities nor a mirror, ignoring the learners' own experience and perpetuating a dictatorship.

From the discourses of the three teachers we realize that career choice was guided by previous academic experiences that were positive and contributed to the admiration of the profession, as the teacher has contact with the profession even before exercise it. One teaches as taught, by incorporating models throughout the school and family life. Into everyday classroom, the teachers put into practice what they learned from their midst, their family, and their interpersonal relationships, among others.

4 Conclusion

Making an exploratory study, elaborating stories of life, brings a paradox: on the one hand, adopting a pragmatic approach that should characterise a scientific paper; on the other, the human dimension that guides the reports and that makes them difficult to convert into material analysis because it is something private. This paradox is ultimately attenuated during a "moment of transition" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) when we accept our own emotions and parted this episode of our life story.

The present study sets on the assumption that teacher identity is something under construction and influenced by the environment. When considering the school environment, we gathered that the curriculum enables the students and teachers to dialogue since learning is always personal.

This communication demonstrates the need for the curriculum to be both a mirror and reflection of daily lives because it needs to enable the students to look through the window and see different realities but also a mirror to enable his/her own reality reflected and shared with the colleagues, validating their own experience.



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