

## Narratives by initial teachers: stories about experiences and challenges

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### Abstract

The present work focuses on narratives by initial teachers involved in a program called Pedagogical Residence (PR), developed in a public university in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to shed some light on the main challenges that those teachers face. The main theoretical framework is Teachers Professional Development (TPD) as developed by Garcia (1992, 2009) and by Day (2001). The data collection took place during meetings held at the University as part of the PR program offered to new teachers to embrace their cause and address their concerns and their will to leave teaching for lack of support. The narratives of experiences were analyzed using thematization (Fontoura, 2011). The main themes were the separation between theory and practice, the lack of self-esteem, and the need for peer support. The findings are in line with the literature and the main recommendation is to develop programs that address real life situations for initial teachers. This study highlights the need for continuous education that supports teachers' professional development.

**Keywords:** Teachers professional development, Narrative analysis, Pedagogical Residence, Quality of education.

## Нарративы молодых учителей: истории о получении опыта и преодолении трудностей

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### Аннотация

Данное исследование рассматривает нарративы молодых учителей, участвующих в программе Pedagogical Residence (PR), разработанной в Университете Рио-де-Жанейро, Бразилия. Программа направлена на освещение проблем, с которыми сталкиваются молодые учителя. Основной теоретической рамкой исследования является теория профессионального развития преподавателей (TPD), разработанная Гарсией (1992, 2009) и Деем (2001). Данные собирались во время встреч в рамках программы PR, направленных на тщательное изучение нарративов молодых учителей. На встречах обсуждались проблемы учителей и пути преодоления причин, из-за которых молодые учителя принимали решение оставить педагогическую практику. Одной из главных причин явилось отсутствие поддержки. Нарративы опыта были проанализированы с помощью тематизации (Fontoura, 2011). Отрыв теории от практики, недостаток уверенности, необходимость поддержки коллег были выделены нами в качестве основных тем. Полученные результаты подтверждают итоги предыдущих исследований, которые обосновывают необходимость развивать программы педагогической подготовки с опорой на жизненные ситуации. Кроме того, данное исследование показывает важность непрерывного образования, способного обеспечить постоянное профессиональное развитие учителей.

**Ключевые слова:** профессиональное развитие учителя, анализ повествования, Pedagogical Residence, качество образования.

### Introducing our paths

Working in the Education field for many years, the focus of my work is preparing teachers for the challenges that come with a professional choice of working in education.

One of our main concerns is the importance of self-reflection when teaching as a profession, as, through all these years teaching teachers to become teachers, we noticed that there are several ways to help with this process. Either looking for intervention strategies, as in a cake recipe, or transmitting knowledge, as applicable. We defend the idea of teachers as self-developers as well as developers of others, as authors of their own work and stimulating students to become authors too. When we manage our own practices, we become researchers of what we do and think, and the likelihood of building knowledge, instead of just transmitting information, increases. Therefore, our idea is to replace training with a perspective of continuous education.

Continuing professional development (CPD) is the perspective from which policy makers promote the quality of teaching today (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and is considered to be a necessary condition to enhance the quality of school education and guarantee national development. Continuing professional development, as a term, refers to learning activities in which professionals engage, to develop and enhance their abilities: it can combine different learning methodologies, such as training workshops, conferences, and events, e-learning programs, best practice techniques and the sharing of ideas, all focused on improvement and effective professional development.

From the teacher education point of view, the CPD is more complex. There are several options and requirements that teachers face, from qualifying as a professional to developing and continually improving teaching skills. From our point of view, the most effective CPD learning activities are the ones that involve teachers both intellectually and emotionally, allowing to them improve their self-esteem, self-confidence, and competence (reflection *on* action), as well as self-evaluation of their practices in their teaching actions (reflecting *in* action)

In the present work, we recognize the definition of professional development as a process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew, and extend their commitment as change agents for the purpose of teaching. Also, as a process by which they acquire and critically develop knowledge, skills, and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning, and practice with children, youngsters, and colleagues, throughout each phase of their teaching lives. (Day, 2001)

### Theoretical framework

In Brazil there are some well-known publications that address teacher training (Cunha, 2013; Gatti, 2010; Nóvoa, 1995, 2009; Pimenta, 2002), as well as writings by this author (Fontoura, 2015, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2013a, 2013b, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Fontoura et al., 2014; Fontoura et al., 2013; Fontoura et al., 2010; Fontoura; Pierro, 2015; Fontoura; Pierro, 2014) that can contribute to our reflections. Some bring issues about learning to teach, others about classroom ecology, dialogical and inter-relational, and about decision making when facing dilemmas in the daily practice. Gatti's proposal (2010) exposes the practical dimension of teaching involving the creation of learning conditions for all students, promoting their development with diversity in mind, based on planning, evaluating, investigating, taking into consideration previous knowledge, and different ways of socializing and interacting. For Gatti et al (2016), there is a need for a positive environment that favors learning, a diversity of resources, and constant follow-up by teachers in order to support students in their processes.

Cochran-Smith e Zeichner (2005) call our attention to the fact that teachers' formation is based upon beliefs that see learning to teach as an investigation, dialoguing

with research in cognitive psychology, with understanding how we learn as a main goal, including how knowledge is acquired and organized by learners.

Professional insertion is recognized as an important step in a teacher's professional life cycle, as it marks the entrance in the career, a scenario of direct responsibility for classroom management – at this point usually without supervision as was at the University during practice. It can be considered the moment when one sees her or himself undertaking the responsibility for teaching and the students' learning processes. As Marcelo Garcia (1992) points out, a teacher's professional development is a continuous process, so we cannot see teachers as subjects of passive training, as they are in constant transformation.

When presenting his work about teachers' professional development, Day (2001) writes about paying attention to significant moments lived by teachers, and how they create meaning out of these moments. Teachers explain to themselves how they see the challenges, they think about what they do daily, building up their practices and beliefs about teaching, understanding that every experience has the potential to be explored. Day (2001) also presents a holistic view of teachers' professional development, thinking about challenges and constraints that can affect their ability to develop competences, so that education can be a better and more satisfying job. For the author, the teachers' professional development depends on their personal and professional lives, the political contexts at the schools where they do their jobs, as well as reflections on their teaching activities. We add political issues in a broad sense, which affect the way policies are set up and dealt with.

According to Cochran-Smith (2012), it is widely agreed that our education processes are never finished. For the author, each new group of students brings new challenges and demands for other resources; changes in society change our challenges and issues as well. The teacher education community is concerned about this topic, and points out that there is a strong need to include opportunities for observation, discussion, meetings, and sharing in the teachers' daily work at schools, in other words, to develop local knowledge.

Huberman (2000) describes phases in teachers' professional path: the early stage of teaching, where they seek activities to improve pedagogical practice; the stabilization phase, solving problems in the educational context and disseminating the academic content between teachers; the diversification phase, which provide a basis to work with new content and make constant updates to match educational innovations; and serenity/exit, when they feel the need to attend training activities in different areas of the school. As the author points out, some of the main concerns in this initial phase include: a) the gap between the ideals built at the University and the reality in the schools; b) alternating feelings of (in)competence and (in)security, creating unexpected situations; c) the need for experimentation and diversification in the work to be developed; d) high motivation; e) the search for challenges, not necessarily just in the beginning, but this initial attitude can mark the future career for years to come.

In other words, teaching is a complex career, in a complex framework, as what happens in a classroom is not predictable; a teacher's work is fragmented, it is hard to combine teaching and the organization of tasks and behaviors, sometimes without proper working conditions, and the difficulty to find peers to share good practices and concerns. Initial teachers have to face dilemmas that affect their performance and influence their will to continue to teach instead of looking for some other less stressful occupation. Marcelo Garcia (1992) states that there are relevant aspects when analyzing teachers development and how they learn to become teachers, the first being concerns about professional development stages, second the understanding of learning to teach as an intellectual maturation process, and third, emphasizing the cultural and social aspects of the profession and their influence on new teachers.

Therefore, investigating how teachers learn to teach becomes a significant challenge in the field of scientific research, in the sense of looking for data and information that can clarify the debate about education in a broad sense and teachers as professionals. The development of critical and reflective consciousness about the role of the University and its importance, not only for the professional of excellence in scientific and technical knowledge, but above all, in the critical knowledge immersed in the values of human education, is in order here.

As a research project for some years at the University, we developed a space called Pedagogical Residence (PR) for our former students who used to return to the University seeking for some answers for their challenges in real classrooms. We meet at least once a week, usually on Saturdays, to discuss readings, exchange experiences, work with arts, self-writings, and group activities, organize papers for events and whatever else comes up. In a way, teacher education, in the context of the Pedagogical Residence, intends to enable pedagogical reflections by initial teachers, bringing up the technical and human dimensions of teaching, which assumes an understanding of its meanings.

Teaching, understood as a complex action, requires, from the individuals in the education process, not only pedagogical knowledge, but also, as developed at the University, an understanding of the institution as a whole, becoming relevant for the teacher to know the space in which teaching, research, and extension take place, as well as external influences that affect a teacher's work. The same applies to getting to know the schools where they teach, the surrounding community, parents, and school staff, as getting to know students is part of the lessons studied.

The guiding principles of teacher education in this case include the articulation between theory and practice, practical and theoretical knowledge, and the disciplinary and pedagogical dimensions of the contents and practices that make up the daily life in schools and universities, institutions that share the education process, and are all part of a social context that influences and impact policies and practices.

## **Methodology**

The research was conducted with a group of teachers that have been together for three years, working on their practices, reflecting upon and sharing their experiences and fears. For the present work, 26 teachers were asked to narrate stories about their insertion in teaching, their main issues, situations they faced, their feelings, and the resources that they had or lacked; the activities were developed during five weeks, and we met once a week, for three hours, at the University.

The methodology, which is based on a qualitative and biographical approach, used the teachers' own narratives and unique experiences to create knowledge. The research participants were initial teachers recently graduated in Pedagogy; the data was gathered from personal narratives, such as journals, oral statements, and photography collections (Bauer & Gaskel, 2002). The information was analyzed and interpreted according to the principles of thematization (Fontoura, 2011b), which analyzes the content and topics that emerge.

The process of thematization follows some steps: the first step is a transcription of the data collected, which is very important to ensure that everything the participants say or write can be read, as many times as necessary, so the next step consists of attentive reading, dialoguing with the data, listening to what the subjects had to say. This reading allows for an interaction that can clarify, to the researcher, the points that seem relevant in his/her perception, which is why it is highly recommended that the person in charge of the research transcribes the data and reads the transcriptions.

The relevant aspects can be considered the body of the analysis, what is going to become working material, to provide reflections, dialogues with the theory, and the steps forward in knowledge in the area researched. This allows us to identify relevant themes in line with the investigation purposes, and identify the context unities, longer excerpts, and significant unities (shorter excerpts). Finally, interpretation according to the theoretical framework, and potential new references that emerged from the data analyzed. The process is carefully developed so that readers can follow and understand the research movement. This technique can be useful for qualitative data analysis and can help researchers in similar subjects, reinforcing the fact that each manner of perceiving phenomena is particular to each researcher that selects the themes to study.

## Results

Our collaborators brought a few issues to our attention, and we can see how the three pieces selected for this work echoed with the literature. The first issue is **'the separation between theory and practice that made it difficult to solve challenging day to day situations'**. Our participants talk about situations where what they learned at university was *"of no use whatsoever"* when facing challenges in their daily practice. During a sharing event, most of the participants brought personal needs to searching for courses or other means of learning *"from practical situations"*, as if one could find cake recipes for teaching. The school context was cited as *"different from what was expected and learned"*, and one teacher stated that she had to (re)learn things she thought she knew about solving problems in the classroom. As far as she was concerned, *"things she learned at the University hindered her routines"*. The authors cited before dialogue with these narratives.

The second issue was **'the lack of self-esteem regarding the recognition of abilities to face challenges'**. Our participants talked about the lack of recognition of their efforts by students, families, and school staff, frustration with the outcomes of their careful planning, their attempts to place guilt (myself, students, family, school system?). There was also a feeling of anxiety about the expectations related to students' performance and attention, that most of the time were disappointing, according to the narratives. The mentioned several times their own initiatives, other teachers' initiatives, and even principals, to create alternatives, most of the times *'with no success'*. Here we can dialogue with Marcelo Garcia (1992, 2009, 2010) and Day (2001) about the process of teachers' professional development under the forces of modern life that demand immediate results. As one teacher wrote: *"I want results, I don't lose my hope but sometimes all I have is hope..."*. Another teacher concluded about her influence on students saying, *"I thought I could be more important to my students but realized that I have little influence on what they do or think...Feelings of no hope, little energy to go on..."*. However, there is light at the end of the tunnel, as two teachers wrote about the challenge of losing hope and trying to recover it when something planned works well. *"We created a school fair to discuss environmental issues and that was a small thing that became a project for grades five and six, the students engaged, loved it and was a pleasant surprise in the middle of a chaotic year, with strikes, lack of payment, and all the problems we had to face, and it was our first year...they didn't teach that in college..."*.

The third issue was **'the need for peer support that neither schools nor educational systems seem to provide'**. Dialoguing with Cochran-Smith (2012), we reflect about insertion in teaching as a situation that can bring conflicting feelings, as some teachers feel alone and hopeless in dealing with the daily dilemmas present in schools and classrooms. The author denounces teaching as a work that is not produced in collaboration and is not

shared either. Participant teachers talked of isolation, *'closed doors'*, lack of partnership, and almost no dialogue. When discovering that their idealized conceptions found no echo in real school life, some mentioned the urge to leave teaching, lots of questioning about choices and possibilities, difficulties in dealing with students and families that *'did not fit expectations'*, and the search for a mentor that would listen to their concerns and help them through a rough path.

### Implications

As the teachers in our research group brought narratives about their first years in teaching, especially the very first year, we dialogue with Huberman (2000), who contributes with insight about this insertion period as one of discoveries and survival, where there is what the author calls a *'reality shock'* that has to do with our beliefs when studying at the University and the reality of school settings, a big everyday challenge. Mixed feelings follow these moments, at the same time a sense of power for mastering a classroom and a sense of loneliness for not counting on anybody else but him or herself.

As stated by Cochran-Smith (2012), teachers build up their own theories about teaching based upon their experiences as students, the initial education received, school *'ethos'*, cultural influences in teachers' rooms, and classroom events. When they perceive what makes their teaching apparel, they can develop a researcher attitude related to what they live, what they do as teachers, and how they can deal with the dilemmas faced by teaching professionals. Understanding our career as a socialization process is perceiving it with the challenges and opportunities to incorporate routines and choose paths to deal with the issues that we face daily. To be able to socialize, a person has to adhere to common venues, share experiences, learn to be a learner, understand how they feel about what happens, and how they react to difficulties.

It becomes evident that entering the teaching profession is a moment of great learning and many discoveries. As Huberman (2000) writes, both aspects lean on each other, allowing survival and growth as beginners to go along reflecting and experiencing new ways of dealing with choices and crossroads. A new culture to be integrated to learnings brought from previous experiences, colleagues to teach, and learn interactions and differences, and some certainties can start to take place, as the integration within a professional setting happens and his/her abilities to teach start to make sense.

### Conclusions

It can be stated that teaching knowledge embodied in the dimensions studied enables a more effective teacher education, even considering the university where the emphasis is placed mainly on research. Therefore, we can present the PR Program as one of the instruments for teacher training designed to improve undergraduate education, since the content and practice of teaching is worked and reflected upon, even with its instrumentality limits.

As teachers develop some sense of security and create a supportive group, they can develop assurance about what they do in their classrooms and confirm their teaching ability, even though it is a period that demands, from the ones that choose to work with insertion, as in our PR program, sensitivity and investigation about how to provide information, counselling, and supervision to new teachers. (TARDIF e RAYMOND, 2000).

The narratives of our participants show that, despite the obstacles, teachers believe in their power to produce emancipatory practices and new ways of thinking and educating. We conclude that teacher education requires actions that provide a reflective teaching

practice and thought that can overcome the distance between pedagogical practice and reality. It must drive the teacher, both in development and in action, to be capable of knowing the elements of their educational and social reality to intervene, understand and practice the meaning of freedom of collaboration among peers. To reflect upon the possibilities and challenges of teaching, we have the role of boosters, as, in addition to the discussions, we have submitted proposals for teachers to create change and invent a better way of working.

In this sense, the study, from its proposal, can be set as a device for the exchange of knowledge between the University and the schools, so that, in this complex cultural environment, knowledge and expertise that can respond effectively to the challenges of teacher formation focused on reinventing educational spaces as enablers of significant and emancipative knowledge production can emerge. Working in this perspective, the PR Program provides beginner teachers with a rich experience in educational situations, making them supporters of teachers' political-historical processes as well as active subjects, enlightened, emancipated, acting as protagonists of their own history.

Our institution, with the PR proposal as one of our actions, becomes a space that consolidates itself as a place where one can build knowledge, learn theory and practice as part of the same process, and become researchers as teachers (Freire, 1996). Finally, the study argues that, if we are to retain promising initial teachers in low-income schools, there is an urgent need to align local and national political agendas to improve teachers' working conditions, salaries, and continuous education, thus providing nurturing environments for beginner teachers.

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