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The role of experienced teachers in the development of pre-service language teachers' professional identity: Revisiting school memories and constructing future teacher selves

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how student teachers perceive the role of more experienced teachers in fostering their pedagogical cultural identities (Burgess, 2016). It reports on a project within the 'Programa Institucional de Bolsas de Iniciação à Docência' (PIBID), a national programme in Brazil to promote teacher recruitment and encourage undergraduates to pursue a career in teaching. The study investigated in-school experiences of four pre-service teachers working in state schools located in peripheral urban areas in São Paulo. Specifically, it examined the ways these student teachers conceptualise their pedagogical contexts and related them to the concrete or symbolic presence of other experienced professionals. The findings are expected to support professional development and inform the revision of teacher education programmes in Brazil.

1. Introduction

Teacher identity studies have attempted to grasp how becoming a teacher involves making sense of past and present experiences (Lee & Schallert, 2016), accounting for the relationships between agency and teacher development (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016) and, more broadly, problematising the practical and political dimensions of teachers' actions (Mockler, 2011). Despite this, teacher education is still mostly adherent to models that fail to address fluidity, hybridity, agency and network collaboration as qualities that influence who we are and how we act in contemporary society.

This paper reports on research findings that characterise the ways in which four Portuguese language student teachers conceptualised their experiences in public schools in peripheral areas of São Paulo, Brazil. The representations constructed by these participants in their direct interactions with more experienced teachers were analysed as well as their conceptualisations of how material and symbolic aspects that were constitutive of the contexts result from experienced teachers' conceptions, values, decisions and actions. The formative process under scrutiny occurred within a national programme for teacher education called PIBID² that aims at promoting cooperation among agents in educational contexts – schools and universities – as an attempt to break with individualistic methodological traditions that prevail in the country. In this sense, the formative process adopts a perspective that

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² PIBID is the abbreviation for 'Programa Institucional de Bolsa de Iniciação à Docência', a national programme in Brazil to promote teacher recruitment and encourage undergraduate students to pursue a career in teaching. The programme involves funding the student-teacher to remain in one single school for practicum activities during at least one year under the supervision of a single school-teacher, who is also the recipient of monetary compensation for undertaking such a role.

addresses teacher education from a social and political standpoint, in tune with more recent approaches to teacher knowledge, development and identity.

In this paper, we examine how these student teachers perceived the role of more experienced teachers (and other school professionals) in the process of constructing their own pedagogical cultural identities (Burgess, 2016). The assumption is that active participation of student teachers in the construction of the curriculum within real, complex and unpredictable contexts of teaching creates opportunities to develop critical reflections on existing theories and practices. In this process, the interaction between student teachers and more experienced teachers promotes opportunities for the emergence of tensions and clashes between how these agents represent and conceptualise teaching and learning, and how student teachers dynamically relate past and present experiences as well as project future images of self in their own identity construction processes.

2. Theoretical framework

The study is theoretically framed within teacher education studies, more specifically teacher situated cognition. Burns, Freeman, and Edwards, 2015 characterize historically produced perspectives on teacher knowledge in conceptual generations that shift from an individual to a social ontology. The technicism from the 1970's disregarded teachers' cognitive work, aiming at the development of standardized behaviour rather than thinking processes. The subsequent development towards innovative methodologies established the ground for addressing teacher knowledge and teacher cognition, since each methodology would promote different ways of thinking. Teachers began to be seen as decision-makers, individuals that chose how to teach, informed by their cognitive capacity (Borg, 2001; Burns, 1992; Freeman & Richards, 1993; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Woods, 1996). In this sense, teachers not only acted but also reflected on their actions. This individual ontology was, however, problematised when studies began to reveal that one's cognitive capacity develops in constant interactions between the individuals and their sociocultural context (Burns & Richards, 2009; Crookes, 2010; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Golombek, 1998; Kubanyiova, 2006, 2012; Yuan & Lee, 2014). Further developments led to a sociohistorical ontology based on the premise that teaching occurs as a social activity that responds to the demands of a given historical moment and involves both doing and thinking (Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, and Thwaite, 2002; Feryok, 2012; Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Golombek & Doran, 2014; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Tsui, 2007, 2003). Teaching and learning are then constructed in social interactions and thinking is conceived of as a function of the place and time in which these interactions occur.

Under this sociohistorical framework, the notions of fixity, stability and linearity that are embedded in most formative perspectives seem to be insufficient to understand the complexity that characterize the process of teacher knowledge construction, which occurs amidst a multiplicity of reference marks and identity positionings. The importance of temporality for the sociohistorical ontology gains more prominence in studies that align with the ontology of complexity and chaotic systems (Burns & Knox, 2011; Feryok, 2010; Finch, 2010; Kiss, 2012). Temporality is then seen as diversity instead of linearity, and references to past, present or future, as observed in the current study, co-occur to construct the teacher's identity as an emerging self-organization, unpredictable in its development within a system of non-hierarchical relations (Burns et al., 2015).

To understand the shift from an individual-based towards a sociocultural perspective, Lee and Schallert (2016) consider the existence of three different traditions in the field of teacher education: a positivistic tradition, a progressive tradition and the social critique tradition. The positivistic tradition is founded on the need to provide student teachers with a body of knowledge so that they can make their methodological decisions on the premise that teacher knowledge, due to its general nature, could be properly applied in different educational realities. The progressive tradition considers the transformations of teacher knowledge in face of teachers' existing knowledge. In this sense, teacher knowledge is not static, but processual, and develops with the incorporation of new knowledge in an ongoing process. The social critique tradition considers the characteristics of the contexts in which pedagogical practice occurs, which includes cultural and linguistic heterogeneity. Becoming sensitive to social diversity is part of a teacher's education, for teachers always respond to the pedagogical needs that spring from the context in which they work. It is in this third tradition, within which the present study is positioned, that Lee and Schallert (2016) point out the rise of a situative perspective to break with the existing traditions in the field of teacher education, emphasizing contexts, social interactions and learning communities (Belland, 2011; Engle, 2006; Greeno, 2011; van de Sande & Greeno, 2012).

Since teaching is a social, cultural, moral and political practice, Crookes (2015) discusses the importance of addressing not only instrumental aspects of pedagogical practice but also those that are beyond the immediate classroom interaction. Educating critical teachers who are sensitive to democratic values in both their practice and their reasoning requires reflexivity and a principled approach that accounts for student teachers' existing school experiences, personal values and life experience.

The instrumental nature of most teacher education programmes prevents us from acknowledging and emphasising the ethical and moral aspects of teaching, which results in insufficient understanding of the broader social and political nature of the profession. As Crookes (2015) points out, these programs fail to consider issues such as power relations within social class, ethnicity and gender. To Crookes, educating critical teachers who are sensitive to the political consequences of their practice requires more than the introduction of critical theory in an education programme. It can only be achieved through teacher participation in political and social actions. Back in the 70's, Freire (1970) had already claimed that critical consciousness cannot be achieved if teachers are provided only with theoretical and methodological resources. Political socialization is essential for the constitution of a teacher's critical identity, and is achieved through participation in social contexts, community life and collaborative work.

Other researchers in the field of language teacher education argue that teachers are transformative intellectuals (Kubanyiova, 2006; Kumaravadivelu, 2012) who theorise their practice as a social activity, striving "not only for academic advancement but also for personal transformation, both for themselves and for their learners (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Problematising the political and ethical bases that underlie identity processes and the development of teacher cognition is essential to respond to the moral dimension

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