

Chapter 1

TEACHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

Text production and school management in focus

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript presents the results of a constructive-collaborative research on learning processes of teachers and school administrators, participants in a professional development program. This program involved researchers from two Brazilian universities in the State of São Paulo (one public and one private) and was sponsored by CNPq (Brazil's National Council for Scientific and Technologic Development). Its data were collected by means of written narratives, interactive conversations, and questionnaires. In agreement with the chosen theoretical framework, teacher learning is herein regarded as an ongoing process, influenced by teachers' personal beliefs, understandings, and knowledge of different natures. In addition, teachers and school administrators are believed to need support in order to develop professionally and continued education proposals involving a school-university partnership centered on demands arising from the school partners' work setting are deemed ideal. This manuscript focuses on data relating to the teaching of text production and on the continued education of schoolteachers and administrators in view of implementing democratic-participative school management. Results indicate that participating teachers, administrators, and researchers have successfully constructed new professional knowledge and point to the importance of in-service education at the workplace.

Keywords: teacher education, professional development, text production, school management, collaborative research.

1. INTRODUCTION

The school – the locus of education par excellence – is viewed as a space in which rights are secured. Thus, upon developing school activities, it is vital to take societal demands into account. In addition, professional preparation should not be regarded as merely providing people with a fixed body of knowledge to be applied throughout their careers. Moreover, it is necessary to devise and conduct initial professional education in such a way that it promotes professional flexibility and adaptation in order to overcome inequalities.

Along these lines, the school can no longer stay the same and teach only the basics, i.e., how to read, write, and calculate. It should also teach students how to exercise their citizenry in a globalized world. Schools should prepare students for life in fast-changing world, which demands the development of diverse knowledge and multiple skills. On the other hand, this new scenario also demands that teachers become citizens of the world in that they should develop personal, social, and cultural knowledge and skills in addition to those of a professional nature. Moreover, they should have thorough understanding and mastery of their teaching content.

Cunningham and Gardner (2004), in a survey titled “Becoming teachers”, highlight the need for careful attention to the long history of accumulated professional practice as a way of lessening teacher marginalization in education policies and practices.

In the last years, the idea that good teaching is more complex than the way it was thought to be at the beginning, is getting stronger. Teaching, each time more, has been recognized as a “complex knowledge mixture that encloses specific and pedagogic content, abilities to teach various students, and, the knowledge and understanding about the context where the teaching takes places” (Tatto, 1993, p. 87), opposing to the idea that anyone can teach. This new way of conceiving the teaching has resulted in a deep change of knowledge, abilities and dispositions teachers should have.

Many authors have studied the issue of professional development in association with curriculum innovations, emphasizing practical possibilities of change (Fullan, 1990; Garcia, 1999; Rinaldi & Parisotto, 2011).

As to the teaching of text production, making students discursively competent implies necessarily advancing learning situations capable of meeting these demands. In this sense, it is extremely important to promote continued teacher education based on teaching demands, results of external evaluations, and analyses of student performance. Thus, teachers should know their teaching content and be able to make it understandable to students by choosing the best examples and analogies, i.e., the best resources, in order to motivate them to learn. In addition, teachers should know how students learn and what they already know and make use of this information to devise activities and teaching materials that can foster student learning and meet the goals set by the school.

Given the complexity of this task, it is vital that teachers and school administrators participate in continued education programs so as to meet and exceed the demands placed by the community since they are responsible for teaching those that need to learn in new ways and from new perspectives.

To this end, we advocate that the school be organized in line with a model of democratic participatory management, thus featuring an organic relationship among team members and emphasizing the pursuit of common goals and collective decision-making (Libâneo, Oliveira, & Toschi, 2003). However, all team members must do their share of the work and consent to coordination and systematic evaluation of deliberations once decisions are made.

Several actions can be developed in a context of democratic-participative school management. It is important to bring all school stakeholders together when analyzing alternatives, making decisions, and bringing to fruition the most adequate solutions to challenges existing in the school. Nevertheless, this process should take into account that both solutions and decisions demand similar procedures such as collecting data and information on the situation to be analyzed (Libâneo et al. 2003).

Moreover, Libâneo et al. (2003) indicate that it is equally necessary to become skilled at research methods and procedures that can contribute to solving school problems, which in turn results in administrators producing knowledge about their work. A research activity implies:

[...] identifying a problem or issue through discussion, observation or action-reflection-action practices; defining ways and means of finding required information and data, e.g., interviews, questionnaires or a literature review in order to assess whether the actions in question have produced the anticipated results; analyzing the data to identify problems and demands, thereby supporting the action-reflection-new action cycle; and proposing intervention actions (Libâneo et al., 2003, pp. 401-402).

In view of a democratic-participative approach to management, we began work at the school in question by acknowledging the importance of its administration making decisions about existing problems and issues. To this end, the school team members got together in order to identify, analyze, reflect, make decisions, and implement solutions to their daily challenges.

2. BACKGROUND

This research - backed by CNPq (Brazil's National Council for Scientific and Technologic Development) - was conducted at a public school located in a disadvantaged neighborhood of Presidente Prudente, State of São Paulo, Brazil. It involved the participation of researchers and students from two universities (one public and one private) and teachers and administrators from the school in question. Participants got together on a weekly basis in order to develop proposed activities and continually appraise their outcomes.

This study adopted a qualitative approach, i.e., it was conducted with the purpose of fostering an in-depth understanding of the characteristics and meanings of collected data (Oliveira, 2007). This research is also of a collaborative nature in that it involves the participation of:

[...] researchers and teachers in both producing knowledge and interactively conducting the research itself, given that collaborative work requires that teachers and researchers jointly construct knowledges, thereby sharing professional development strategies (Ibiapina, 2008, p. 25).

Broadly speaking, a collaborative research design implies the establishment of ongoing conversation among researchers, teachers, and administrators, with emphasis on investigating, creating new knowledge, and searching for solutions to concrete problems of everyday school life.

The collaborative research framework conceives of teachers as active participants responsible for their own continued education, since it values their previously acquired expertise and their present working conditions (Cole & Knowles, 1993).

The participating teachers' work during the research was monitored by means of weekly meetings, a questionnaire, and oral and written narratives.

At the outset, institutional bonds were established and we began eliciting demands from the participants, i.e., schoolteachers and administrators. As to the teaching of Portuguese, teachers responded to a questionnaire, which informed the development of professional preparation workshops on theoretical-methodological aspects aimed at reflecting on the teaching of a mother tongue. These workshops were conducted at the school.

In this sense, we, in cooperation with the other participants, established a chronogram that included weekly meetings. Their goal was to provide continued education to the participating teachers by encouraging their reflection on language and strengthening important concepts such as text, reading, cohesion, consistency, text genre, and text evaluation.

In line with what Ibiapina (2008) claims to be the attributions of all participants, it was up to the researchers to elicit the teachers' learning needs as regards the teaching of Portuguese, specifically in connection with text production, assess their prior knowledge through a questionnaire, provide texts for collective study, tape and transcribe conversations, and revise them with the help of those involved. In turn, the participating

teachers imparted their learning needs, participated in the writing of and, as a result, endorsed contents to be addressed at workshops, responded to the questionnaire, often read educational texts in advance, collaborated with peers in reflective actions, and participated in revising transcripts of audiotaped conversations.

The work with the school administrators began by discussing topics that had come up during planning. At first, they pointed to violence and school-family partnerships as some of the issues that had been indicated by the community as a whole through discussion and observation of daily school practices. Based on this initial diagnosis, a questionnaire was conceived comprising eight open-ended questions involving previously diagnosed issues whose goal was to find out what the school stakeholders (students, parents, staff, faculty, and administrators) knew and thought of these issues.

After the data were collected, a study group comprising representatives from the school community (families, staff, faculty, and administration) and the university (researchers and graduate and undergraduate students) was established. The group's goal was to chart and analyze the collected data and agree on the theoretical framework to assist in understanding the elicited issues and in developing intervention proposals to overcome the identified problems. Participants met on a weekly basis at the school; the meetings were audiotaped or filmed and later transcribed.

The group work, regarding both the teaching of Portuguese and professional preparation of administrators and faculty, maybe regarded as continued education in that it was a "continuation of initial teacher education, aimed at their theoretical and practical professional, development and acquisition of a broader general culture and professional experience at the workplace" (Libâneo, 2001, p. 198).

Thus, continued education constitutes an opportunity for providing participants with life-long professional learning, not the kind deriving from information accumulation, but as their chance to rethink practices and construct new knowledge, a process made possible by analysis, reflection, discussion, and sharing of different experiences.

3. TEACHING OF TEXT PRODUCTION

This section presents conceptions of the ten participating teachers, who work with elementary school children on language, reading, text production, and textual cohesion and consistency, since these conceptions drive their teaching of reading and writing. The data presented in this article have to do with answers obtained through a questionnaire containing six questions on theoretical concepts related to the teaching of a mother tongue (Table 1).

According to the concepts articulated by the majority of participants, language is a "mode of communication," a structuralist perspective in which language is seen as a set of symbols that combine among themselves according to some given rules to produce and transmit a message to a receptor (de Saussure, 1969).

Language can be defined as a "mode of communication", an "expression of thought" or a "way of interacting". These three concepts are not mutually exclusive; each concept carries its own theoretical and methodological implications.

As regards the concept of language, four participants established a relationship between code and the social group that uses it to establish verbal interaction, whereas some still associated this concept to the writing code only.

Table 1. Theoretical concepts.

TEACHER	LANGUAGE	TONGUE	READING	TEXT	TEXT COHERENCE	TEXT COHESION
T01	Communication tool	Way people write	Decoding texts and information	Expressing ideas	Maintaining chain of ideas during writing	Mistakes in nominal and verbal agreement
T02	The way people communicate	Writing code	Meaning of meaningful graphic symbols	No answer	No answer	Organized text ideas
T03	Way people communicate through a text	Way people speak and write within a group	Act of decoding graphic signs	Set of developed ideas: stories, poems, etc.	Keeping the meaning of text	Organization of ideas
T04	Communication tool	Code used by a people	Decoding linguistic symbols to understand message	Message	Grammar elements employed to maintain meaning	Chain of ideas
T05	Communication model	Code used by a people	Act of decoding	Message	Grammar elements	Chain of ideas
T06	No answer	No answer	No answer	No answer	No answer	No answer
T07	Communication	Writing code	Decoding a code	No answer	Text agreement	Organization of ideas; triggering
T08	No answer	No answer	No answer	No answer	No answer	No answer
T09	No answer	No answer	Very important. It enlarges vocabulary and broadens knowledge	Information	Grammar elements	Organization of ideas, sequence of events
T10	Communication . In order to communicate people may employ visual, gestural language, etc.	Norms and rules constructed by a society, according to some written or spoken standard	Interpreting signs and signifiers produced by an author	Set of ordered ideas about a topic or issue	Grammar structures that help in organizing a text	Ordering of ideas, following a theme

According to de Saussure (1969), langue is “the social component of language, exterior to the individual, who can neither create nor change it; it only exists in virtue of some kind of contract established among community members” (p. 22).

With respect to the concept of reading, most participating teachers still view reading as a decoding process. This perception must be expanded, since decoding without understanding constitutes a futile and tedious activity. In this sense, Koch and Elias (2007) claim that there are reading conceptions focusing on the author and text in addition to the author-text-reader interaction. Hence, each reading conception is correlated to a different conception of language, subject, and text.

Likewise, Marcuschi (2008) emphasizes that textualization is established from the author-text-reader perspective. Marcuschi (2008) views the text as both process and product, whose interchange involves a linguistic setting (co-textuality) and a communicative situation (contextuality).

Overall, the concept of text expressed by the participating teachers is linked to content-related aspects. It is possible to notice the recurrence of terms that emphasize this content-related character in their answers; words such as idea, information, and message are frequently used.

In this sense, the text is no longer seen as a space for author-reader interaction, which goes against what the Ministry of Education [MED] (1997, p. 11.) recommends:

Discourse, when produced, manifests itself linguistically through a text. Thus, it is possible to affirm that a text is the product of an oral or written discourse activity that constitutes a meaningful and finished whole, whatever its extent. It is a verbal sequence composed of a set of relationships established by cohesion and coherence. This set of relationships has been termed textuality.

With respect to textual coherence, although it can be observed that some concepts are incomplete, the research participants did mention the importance of a text displaying some concatenation of ideas, meaning, textual organization, and maintenance of meaning. Some teachers did not respond and two of them emphasized the importance of grammar structures to promoting textual coherence. In complement to their answers, it should be noted that coherence is that which lends textuality to the text and is the product of a process of interaction among author, text, and reader.

As for textual cohesion, some misconceptions are noteworthy: one teacher mentioned that textual cohesion had to do with errors in verbal and nominal agreement, whereas another referred to 'textual triggering.' Two teachers did not respond. The other concepts mentioned relate to organized ideas and linked ideas. Here, too, there is a need to expand the concept; it is important that text-production teachers master textual cohesion mechanisms (semantic and syntactic connections), which are employed to structure the text and promote its consistency.

Thus, we emphasize that teachers' ability to reflect on their own performance and concepts guiding their practice constitutes a very important aspect of teaching. However, this ability is closely related to their training. In this sense, Schön (1987) argues that reflexivity provides teachers with flexibility to act in the face of classroom demands faced by them on a daily basis.

4. SCHOOL MANAGEMENT: NOTES FOR OVERCOMING EVERYDAY SCHOOL CHALLENGES

Working with the school administrators was a special moment; it was then that they, along with other members of the school community, i.e., faculty, staff, families, and researchers, began thinking about the accorded diagnosis and the best way of giving feedback and indications of intervention proposals to all those who responded to the questionnaire. This led the participants to jointly come up with an educational proposal to overcome or mitigate the two challenges brought forth at previous meetings: violence and school-family partnership.

In view of democratic participative school management, everybody agreed that it was essential "to ensure participation of the entire school community, since projects proposals imposed by the principal and/or pedagogical coordination are seldom legitimized by the whole group and, as a result, doomed to fail" (Franco, 2009, p. 173).

The study group was important in that it enabled reflection on and analysis of data collected through the questionnaire in order to coordinate the development of the educational project from proposals presented by each group of participants (e.g., teachers, administrators, and so forth). The weekly meetings provided participants with opportunities to rethink their practices as education professionals or parents, constructing new knowledge by means of analysis, reflection, discussion, appraisal of different viewpoints, and creation of preliminary versions of the proposal, which was discussed, improved, and sanctioned by

the school team. These meetings constituted opportunities for teamwork involving the school administration, faculty, staff, families, and university researchers and students toward the implementation of collectively made decisions.

The proposal comprised several actions, e.g., a theater group, indicators of action for collective living, valorization and encouragement of students, continued education for everyone (faculty, administration, and staff), strengthening of school-family partnerships through dialog with the latter, family involvement in planning and assessment of school activities and actions, organization of workshops and lectures addressing issues indicated by families, and supervising students' daytrips. Needless to say that a few challenges emerged as a result of dealing with so diverse a group, but the work was grounded on respect for differences and participation open to all group members.

5. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has effectively established a partnership between the school and academics. Moreover, it has fully met the demands placed by the school and successfully brought together its teachers' learning needs and our interest in the advancement of scholarship. Therefore, taking into account the reality of the partner school, other proposals will be drawn up based on the information obtained through this research.

This study enabled the development of research at the graduate and undergraduate levels and the dissemination of its results through journals, conference proceedings, and book chapters. Knowledge arising from this study can promote the development of continued education programs at the teachers' workplace, i.e., the school. In this sense, the research results will enable the construction of indicators of actions aimed at implementing continued education proposals capable of meeting teachers' real learning needs and the characteristics of their work setting, vis-à-vis the teaching of the mother tongue.

Shulman (1986) highlights the importance of collecting data on teachers' practical knowledge, collating and interpreting them in order to build a bibliography of cases capable of promoting reflection on teaching.

6. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

Regarding the teaching of text production, the results from this study point to participants' lack of knowledge of text production, which is to say that participants do not see the text as the locus for author-reader interaction. For the same reason, the conception of language that guides the participating teachers' work has a monological basis, which does not promote actions and effects of meaning amongst interlocutors, according to the communicative situation.

The interviewees demonstrated a significant lack of textuality standards and this can affect their evaluation of students' texts. In spite of claiming that they take idea development, paragraph structuring, spelling, punctuation, cohesion and coherence, suitability to writing mode, and absence of orality into account when evaluating students' texts, this may be compromised by the fact that they know text production standards only superficially.

The main role of elementary school teachers is to effectively teach students how to read and write, so knowledge of the mother tongue is essential for students to recognize possibilities for acting on, persuading, and convincing their interlocutors and this can only happen through language, which should be regarded as a mode of interaction, enabling the development of knowledge and exercise of citizenship.

Elementary school teachers' everyday practices comprise continual challenges whose solution cannot be found in recipe books. It takes a lot of study and the habit of seeking information. Therefore, the process of remedying inefficient teaching practices is slow; it cannot be limited to initial teacher education and does not depend on the teacher alone. It is necessary to establish fruitful bonds between universities and elementary schools and promote the importance of research and life-long learning.

As to working with the school administration and faculty, the following aspects seem necessary for the school to successfully perform its social function: well-prepared teachers with quality initial and continued education, one that enables them to clearly understand their goals and contents; content-specific methodology so as to provide learning conditions and to foster constant evaluation, i.e., enable teachers to judiciously prepare and develop their teaching plans; collective construction of the Political-Pedagogical Project, aimed at decentralizing and democratizing the pedagogical, legal, and organizational decision-making process; search for increased participation of school stakeholders; significant role of school principal and coordinators in promoting collective and collaborative work; availability of adequate work conditions so that all school personnel can perform their tasks successfully; and democratic management, enabling participation of the community in school activities and actions.

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