

Identities and Training of Primary School Teachers: Realities and Challenges

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to an initial teachers' education that promotes life-long education and professional effectiveness, presenting a research carried out with the objective of relating curricula of initial teachers' education and the basic professional identities generated in them. Our aim was to know what kind of impact initial teachers' education curriculum had in the construction of professional identities. Furthermore, we aimed to understand which aspects of the initial teachers' education were specially related with particular aspects of the professional identities. This study involved one school of initial teachers' education located in Porto, one of the most important urban centres of Portugal. In order to characterize curricula we collected documents of four periods of time of the last thirty years of the 20th century. In order to study teachers' basic professional identities 40 biographical interviews were carried out. Four different teachers' basic identities were identified as well as the way how professional paths change these first identities.

1. Introduction

In this paper we intend to discuss the training of teachers of the first stages of the educational system focusing on the construction of professional identities. With Claude Dubar [1] we look at the construction of professional identities as a process that conforms to a double transaction - the biographical, of the subject with him/herself, between who he/she has been and wants to be; and the relational, between the subject and what is offered in the training and work contexts, 'offers' that can challenge or inhibit the ways he/she wants to be. Despite the fact that in the contemporary world much broader (if not unlimited) possibilities of being exist, expectations and desires interact with representations of the professional role that are more prominent in the culture or groups of belonging and reference, originating what Claude Dubar [1] calls forms of identity, which result from the interactions between the person and the

institutional, social, or organizational structures as a function of identification, differentiation and opposition processes. Identity forms are limited in number and correspond to the possible social positions where different subjects are brought together.

Data was collected through the analysis of documents and biographical interviews of teachers that had their initial training at the same institution (in the city of Porto) at four different historical moments: the first half of the 70s (before the Carnation Revolution), the second half of the 70s, the 1980s and the 1990s. For the purpose of this paper only the biographical part of the study will be taken into account. Ten teachers from each historical period were interviewed.

The biographical interview was organized as a semi-structured interview, having as fields the different personal and professional periods of the interviewees' lives - the path before the training, the period of the initial training and the path after the initial training.

2. Analysis and interpretation

Four central dimensions will be the focal points: choice of profession; professional socialization; meanings of being a teacher; and perspectives on school knowledge.

2.1. Choice of profession

The 'choice' of the teaching profession is placed, for the teachers of these educational levels, in a social climbing process. The training course for student teachers, whether in 'Escolas Normais' or in higher education institutions but without conferring the degree ('bachelor'), becomes attractive given the prestige that is given to the profession when associated with the conditions of access, study and professional exercise, considered easy and particularly appropriate for women. The influence of parents is noticeable and indicates a social climbing trajectory.

[...] the parents said: «Look, you go because it is a nice course for a girl». (Interview nr 30, course of 72/74).

Clearly, for social groups of lower buying power, the pragmatic aspect held by the possibility of achieving professionalization by concluding an intermediate level course (teaching diploma) is associated to the prestige that those groups attribute to the profession. In this relationship between the social and the symbolic that so fairly characterizes the choice of a teaching profession; one can observe, in many of the statements of the female teachers, the process in which a sense of mission, vocation or talent, seen as particular to their profession, is appropriated.

I always wanted to be a teacher, so, then already [primary school] I would say that I wanted to be a teacher, I remember I would pay a lot of attention [to my teachers] and identified [with them]. (Interview nr 21, course of 93/97).

About half of the interviewees indicate having chosen the profession feeling a complete absence of vocation, and a higher number of references to vocation appear as the choices based on criteria of easiness diminish.

In the interviews there are also statements showing that in their process of choice of profession some female teachers were influenced by the examples of good or bad teachers, through processes of identification, differentiation or opposition.

I had only one teacher from the first till the fourth year, she was the director of the school, she was a person... I can say she is my idol, she has always been, I think since I was six years old the only thing I wanted to be was primary school teacher, I never considered being anything else [...] a lot because of her influence [...]. (Interview nr 17, course of 73/75).

In short, the data seems to indicate that elevating the level of training when associated to forms of recruitment and selection that minimize the choices based on easiness increases the number of choices by 'vocation'. The patterns of choice or decision show the will of this historical and social group in giving the profession an affective character (against its authoritarian tradition).

2.2. The process of socialization of teachers: training and first years

The interviewees devalue the formal curriculum in their training which they perceive in terms of

subjects. For the interviewees, the informal curriculum is the one they effectively recognize as having had a training result and it concerns especially learning that happened outside the classroom, even though, here and there, it also regards learning that took place in the classroom. Those resulting from the peer group, from teaching reflection meetings between teachers and students, from areas of the curriculum not considered to be subjects (disciplines) and those intrinsic to the teaching-learning process in classes are the ones that stand out. In general, for the interviewees, the 'value' of their initial training is connected with its practical character, concerning the experience of teaching children (internship, autonomy in the teaching practices, going beyond the plan), the ways of teaching-learning, the areas of expression and the professional/academic character of the training (centred or not in the profession). The relevance of the training for the contexts of action is considered higher by those trained in the revolutionary period (professional training) and lower by those trained in the 1990s, indicating that the integration of teachers training in higher education institutions made the training more academic.

The transition from the situation of student to a professional situation comes as a decisive stage in the passage of life of those interviewed, given the contradictions between the conceptions of education propagated by the training period (evident in the visions of oneself as a person and as a professional at the end of the training) and professional practice. This discrepancy leads teachers who are at the beginning of their career to adopt strategies of survival and control, generating a lack of investment in their profession, above all if the idealized future and/or the representations of the ideal school that they still possess vanishes and in its place appear disenchantment, insecurity and the consequent routine nature of teaching:

I had to change the idealistic vision that I had of the profession. (Interview n° 5, course of 1994).

I left with some ideals, some of which I had given up on. Some adaptations had to be made! (Interview n° 8, course of 1996).

When leaving the course I had certain expectations that I didn't achieve at all! [...] My greatest anguish is to have to give up or to relegate some of my ideas to second place if I find that I am not going to carry them out and to verify that there is some contradiction between what I do and what I think. (Interview n° 9, course of 1979).

I was very lonely and the distance between what I experienced in the initial training and the reality that I had to face was so frightening that I

didn't know what to do, except put my head between my hands! (Interview n° 12, course of 1981).

2.3. The meanings of “being a teacher”

For teachers who received their training in different periods, four base identities are identified that currently structure conceptions of being a teacher:

- a) identity centred on an education of austerity and conformism type;
- b) the identity centred on the professional who is the affective and transforming type;
- c) the identity centred on an education of a type which is technical-affective and innovative and;
- d) the identity centred on the learning of a cognitive and civic type.

a) These teachers define their activity above all on the task of teaching in the primary school, which they perform in an atmosphere of austerity. There exists an awareness of the existing relation between the environment of training that is undergone, which is this type of education, and an authoritarian society.

b) This identity seems to have been constructed in inevitable opposition to the identity of the previous period: the affective environment in the place of austerity and the transformation of the place of conformity. The transforming dimension appears here to be a product constructed in the training relationships, where the focusing on the child is associated with social change: it is about improving the conditions of life and expression of the most disfavoured children. The appearance of the “identity of professional” in the place of the “identity of education” seems to indicate that the teachers trained in this period base their identity on the awareness of the necessity to dignify their profession.

c) This identity is once again centred on the teacher as someone that teaches but who is also concerned about improving this task and taking care “to be present” in the pupils’ lessons: by trying to master the instruments of education related to learning and creating a climate of pleasant learning. The references concerning innovation and education for values in this identity are part of the mainly instrumental position that distinguishes this identity, but bear little relationship to the awareness of the social relations underlying the educational relationship.

d) These teachers see their teaching activity more in the light of the learning to be carried out by the pupils rather than according to what the teacher has to teach them. The aim is that the pupils acquire the capacity and the will to learn. Here one feels a strong influence from the constructivist perspectives in the formulation of the model of this

identity. The relation with society seems now to assume a greater sense of consistency, with references to education for citizenship and democracy, but as an extension of a scientific representation of the teaching-learning process and not as a conscientious decision about the social relation underlying the educational relationship.

2.4. Teachers and school knowledge

It is evident that soon after their professional initiation, the base professional identity undergoes a process of *re-composition* that varies from one person to another. In general, the construction of the teaching profession and consequently, of their professional identity, seems more than anything to fit into an informal, individual, intuitive process, carried out in the day to day activity, that is to say fundamentally in terms of the pedagogical relationship in the context of classroom (the resource that Montero Mesa [2] designates by latent models) and in the contact with their peers (in explicitly rewarding situations, most of them in situations of discrete suffering). This idea seems reinforced by the devaluing effect that the majority of the informers attribute to their initial training and to continuous training.

Relations with children is the main source of attachment to a profession that, in practice, is economical with specific professional knowledge to their profession, to adopt the traditional forms of pedagogical work that continue to characterize school cultures, to which are associated traditional concepts about school knowledge.

3. Conclusions

Two aspects show up from the results of this work: on one side the way ideas and practices transmitted in training and by social changes affect the construction of the identities of the teachers; on the other the realisation of the existence of two important models that have an influence on choices and also the different ways of being a teacher: the traditional and the critical or innovator.

Apparently the ideas transmitted by training and social changes add new transforming elements to the identities, identities that in the meantime revolve around two central nuclei: innovation and tradition.

These two forms of identity - which also attract other elements derived from social changes and the challenges of training - have a parallel in the teachers as people (where the ideal professional and the more down to earth maintain a difficult relationship) and in the relations between training – which is a transmitter of new perspectives - and the real contexts of work - where traditional ways of work prove to be difficult to modify.

In these, the traditional vision of school knowledge is still imposed, demonstrating the importance, given our advance towards the information society, to reflect on the construction of teachers' professional identities about the first years of the basic school education in the context of training and the contexts of work.

The results also give us the topics for this reflection: on the one hand it would be a matter of placing this diversity in the place of the duality revealed, whether it be a traditional form - or else the other - innovative or critical - as both feed on the same lack of realism (one for too much idealism, the other for too little idealism); on the other hand, to go and look to the peripheral elements that are associated to these two forms of being - coming from social changes and from training - the bases for the construction of this diversity.

As far as the part of the training is concerned, we should raise the level of training without making it too academic, but instead making it more relevant for the contexts of work. With regard to the work contexts it is a question of being bold enough to give up for good conceptions about knowledge, and to adhere to ways which are more active, meaningful and part of the knowledge of daily life. This is for reasons linked to the direction of the school, for reasons linked to social and human rights that are associated to it, and for reasons linked to the development of the knowledge society.

4. References

[1]Dubar, C., *A Socialização – a Construção de identidades sociais e profissionais* [The Socialization – social and professional Identities Construction], Porto, Porto Editora, 1997.

[2]Montero Mesa, L., *La Construcción del Conocimiento Profesional docente* [The Construction of Teachers' professional knowledge], Rosario, Homo Sapiens Ediciones, 2001.