

Construction of the professional identity of portuguese language teachers during their initial teacher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a research project developed with the objective of understanding, from a teacher identity and cognition perspective, the concepts constructed by pre-service teachers of what it means to be a teacher and teach and learn portuguese in working conditions characterized by social and cultural diversity, as well as economic adversity. The study reveals how two undergraduate students in Letras (a teaching degree which entitles its holders to teach disciplines both in middle and high school) participating in a national teacher education program resorted to representations of the school and teaching in order to build references that constituted the foundations of both their formative experiences as teachers and the mental projections they constructed of their pedagogical work and professional identity. The data analysis focused on the referral processes produced by the participants based on the contrast between their previous and current experiences and expectations, captured by the methodological tools used in the research.

KEYWORDS

teacher education; teacher identity; language teaching.

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A CONSTRUÇÃO DA IDENTIDADE PROFISSIONAL DE PROFESSORES DE LÍNGUA PORTUGUESA EM FORMAÇÃO INICIAL

RESUMO

Apresentam-se neste trabalho resultados de pesquisa desenvolvida com o objetivo de compreender, em suas bases identitárias e cognitivas, as concepções construídas por professores em formação inicial do que é ser docente e do que é ensinar e aprender língua portuguesa em condições de trabalho caracterizadas pela diversidade social e cultural e pela adversidade econômica. Observa-se como dois licenciandos em letras, participantes de um programa nacional de formação docente, recorrem a representações de escola e de docência para construir referências que fundamentem suas experiências formativas como professores e as projeções que constroem para seu trabalho pedagógico e sua identidade profissional. Constituem dados de análise os processos de referência produzidos pelos participantes com base no contraste entre suas experiências e expectativas prévias com aquelas vivenciadas nas escolas, nos diferentes momentos capturados pelos instrumentos metodológicos utilizados na pesquisa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

formação de professores; identidade docente; ensino de língua.

CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA IDENTIDAD PROFESIONAL DE PROFESORES DE LENGUA PORTUGUESA EN FORMACIÓN INICIAL

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta resultados de investigación cuyo fin es entender, desde la perspectiva de su identidad y bases cognitivas, las concepciones construidas por los profesores en la formación inicial sobre lo que significa ser docente y enseñar y aprender portugués en condiciones de trabajo caracterizadas por la diversidad social y cultural, y por la adversidad económica. Se observa cómo dos licenciandos en letras, participantes en un programa nacional de formación docente, recurren a representaciones de la escuela y de la docencia para construir referencias que fundamenten sus experiencias formativas como docentes y las proyecciones que construyen para su trabajo pedagógico y su identidad profesional. Los datos de referencia son los procesos de referencia producidos por los participantes basados en el contraste entre sus experiencias y expectativas previas con las vivenciadas en las escuelas, en los diferentes momentos capturados por los instrumentos metodológicos utilizados en la investigación.

PALABRAS CLAVES

formación docente; identidad docente; enseñanza de lenguas.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents findings from a research project which investigated the participation of pre-service teachers in school contexts characterized by social, cultural, and linguistic diversity and the effects of this participation in terms of professional education and identity formation.¹ The research participants were two undergraduate students in *Letras* (a teaching degree which entitles its holders to teach disciplines both in middle and high school) from a public university in the state of São Paulo, who joined a national teaching education program.² Both participants developed their practicum activities in state schools, away from the political, economic, or cultural hubs of the city. Such schools had unsatisfactory results in the official evaluation indexes of their institutional conditions and pedagogical results. The students in these schools come from the most impoverished strata of the population, and they make up the cultural and linguistic diversity predominant in most state schools of the largest urban centers of Brazil. The representations constructed by these two participants during the performance of their activities in the school context were analyzed, observing the contrast of their previous experiences and expectations with those lived in the schools.

In Brazil, the debate on teachers' and students' identity has become essential for the academic output on portuguese language teaching, especially from the 1980s. Since then, following the expansion of the public school system and the establishment of 8 years of compulsory education for all schoolchildren, uneducated and unschooled populations have gained access to schooling (Castilho, 1988a, 1988b, 2012; Franchi, 1991; Geraldi, 1984, 1991; Geraldi, Silva and Fiad, 1996; Marinho, 2001; Soares, 1984).

Teacher education then became the subject of inquiry by research which looked into the conditions that hindered schools from achieving their goals as a result of the predominance of a normative and prescriptive pedagogical tradition (Bagno and Rangel, 2005; Fregonezi, 1999). Teaching practice came to be the

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- 1 The research called *Conceptualisations of pedagogical contexts and development of appropriate pedagogies: a multiple-case study of pre-service language teachers working in peripheral urban state schools in São Paulo* is the result of a partnership between teachers from the Department of Education at the University of Bath (United Kingdom) and the School of Education at the Universidade de São Paulo (USP) (University of São Paulo).
 - 2 When the data of this research were being produced, the participants had recently joined the *Programa Institucional de Bolsa de Iniciação à Docência* (PIBID — Institutional Teaching Initiation Scholarship Program) from the *Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior* (CAPES — Higher Education Personnel Improvement Coordination) of Universidade de São Paulo (PIBID — CAPES/USP), a national program in Brazil to promote teacher recruitment and encourage undergraduate students to pursue a career in teaching. The program 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.

object of analyses, debates, and proposals aimed to explore the causes of its difficulties and propose approaches that might enable the creation of groundbreaking or transformative teaching practices (Aparício, 1999; Silva, Pilati and Dias, 2010; Signorini, 2007).

The focus of academic and pedagogical proposals for portuguese language teaching and teacher education then shifted onto issues of teacher identity in its relation to the social and political role of language education in an economically unequal society, such as the Brazilian one. Such studies have explored the development of more agentive teaching practices, which function as resources to change the conditions of portuguese teaching within schools, as well as the ways in which portuguese language teachers are prepared professionally under these conditions (Benevides, 2006; Oliveira, 2006). This highlights the need to take into account the viewpoints of pre-service teachers regarding their professional education (Andrade, 2003). The identity construction of the portuguese language teacher aiming at social transformation might then be able to provide a contrast to the negative image conjured up by Brazilian society about this professional (Kleiman, 2006, 2009). Teachers would thus take up the role of ethnographers (Heath, 1983) who attempt to interpret their pupils' learning needs considering their cultural and social background (Kleiman, 2007).

Similarly to what was put forward by the aforementioned studies, the process of teacher education analyzed in this article is grounded in the reflexivity of pre-service teachers in regard to their formative trajectory in a process characterized by authorship and agency, autonomy and criticality.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is based on studies undertaken in the field of teacher education, and particularly on those which aim to understand how knowledge is produced by language teachers depending on the characteristics of the social contexts in which their professional education takes place. It starts from the social, cultural, and historically situated nature of teacher education, in which knowing, doing, and feeling are constructed in interactive processes and in response to the demands presented by a given context and its specificities (Breen *et al.*, 2001; Feryok, 2012; Golombek and Doran, 2014; Golombek and Johnson, 2004; Johnson and Golombek, 2011; Tsui, 2007, 2003). Therefore, our discussion distances itself from views of teacher education based on methodological or applied perspectives in which knowledge and practices are dissociated, and practices are logically and temporally subordinated to knowledge (Tardif, 2002).

In another sense, the formative process unfolds in the midst of the complexity of the contexts of professional practice, with the participation of pre-service teachers in situations of multiple and diverse identity positioning. Therefore, the assumption is that a teacher's formative process does not evolve around principles of causality or linearity. Rather, it is seen as a system of non-hierarchical relations, which are not predictable and cannot be pre-determined (Burns, Freeman and Edwards, 2015).

According to this perspective, teacher education is conceived as a sociocultural process and not an individual one. Concurring with the ideas put forward by Lee and Schaller (2016), in the present study, teacher education is based on critical positions adopted by the participants towards the circumstances in which they develop professionally and that are therefore sensitive to the social diversity and the linguistic heterogeneity that characterize these contexts. Thus, teaching consists of social, cultural, moral, and political practices (Crookes, 2015), and the critical teacher education which is responsive to democratic values requires school and life experiences and the development of ethically responsible personal values. Technical and methodological training reduced to instrumental values turns out to be insufficient, as critical awareness can only fully flourish if pre-service teachers participate in school contexts, community life, and collaborative work (Freire, 1973).

Stating that critical teacher education perspectives are guided by the principle that teachers' actions are morally and ethically grounded has an important implication. It embraces the assumption that teachers are transformative intellectuals (Kumaravadivelu, 2012) who think about their practice in response to the changing needs of their contexts and the individuals who construct these contexts collaboratively, rather than technicians who passively apply methods, or practitioners who are not capable of theorizing and can only act and reflect upon their actions.

Given the social and pedagogical implications of the educational context, Kubanyiova and Crookes (2016, p. 126) emphasize that pre-service teachers should be aware of the moral bases of their actions as agents must face political, economic, and social realities to ensure that their students develop their language possibilities.

The strengthening of political, moral, and ethical principles underlying the education of teachers who are socially committed would seek to respond to the five knowledge domains proposed by Goodwin (2010). The personal knowledge domain is rooted in the biography of the individual and defines their teaching philosophy; the contextual knowledge domain involves understanding school, society, and who the children and the youth of the community are; the pedagogical knowledge domain comprises the content and the syllabus to be taught as well as teaching theories and methods; the sociological knowledge domain relates to the diversity of education and its cultural relevance, and the different conceptions of social justice; and, finally, the social knowledge domain underpins the implementation of democratic and collaborative processes in the classroom both to produce knowledge and to settle any conflicts that might emerge (Goodwin, 2010, p. 22).

The data presented and analyzed in this paper take into account the relevance of these five domains for critical language teacher education. In this scenario, the research participants — pre-service portuguese language teachers — were enrolled in a teacher education program based on the principles aforementioned. In this program, the proposals for portuguese language teaching and teacher education are oriented towards the defense of democratic possibilities,

participation, and struggle for social transformation, as well as the construction of a society that could be more equitable, less economically unequal, and more responsive to cultural diversity and heterogeneity. The research participants developed their educational activities in schools located in the economic periphery of the city of São Paulo and, within this context, while constructing their professional identities, they reconnected with memories to create new conceptions of school, teaching, and learning.

The theoretical framework for data analysis in the present study is based on the perspective that knowledge objects are not *a priori* given as static referents; rather, they are constructed in circumstances of interaction and referral processes that derive from our sociocognitive interaction with the physical, social, and cultural world. In this sense, “the designated entities are regarded as objects-of-discourse rather than as objects-of-the-world” (Koch, 2002, p. 79).

Therefore, this perspective challenges “the hypothesis of a referential power of language that is founded or legitimized by a direct (and true) connection between words and things” (Mondada, 2002, p. 118-119). It then posits that “rather than presupposing *a priori* stability of the entities in the world and in language, it is possible to reconsider the issue on the basis of the constitutive instability of the categories, both cognitive and linguistic, as well as their processes of stabilization” (Mondada, 2002, p. 118-119).

In their attempts to understand the processes in which they are involved and the contexts in which they collaborate, the participants not only retrieve previous references but build up new referents (Marcuschi, 2001). The construction of objects of discourse thus results from collaborative processes, discursively performed in the interaction between participants in their symbolic practices in context (Mondada, 2002, p. 121). Moreover, these constructions are not chaotic or disordered, but structured by memory, and “operate on a psychological, discursive, linguistic level, arising from social competences, viewpoints, situated activities, and intersubjective practices rather than uncertain properties of the world” (Mondada, 2002, p. 125-126).

During the process of data collection, we sought to enable the research participants to produce meanings about their experiences in schools as part of their teacher education in a situated way, in response to interactions with the individuals that constitute the school context. Therefore, the reference to the context is not a pre-existing construct, but a situated construction, in which “a multiplicity of situated players discretize language and the world and give them meaning, individually and socially constituting entities” (Mondada, 2002, p. 119).

The negotiations of meanings undertaken by the research participants emphasize, therefore, the process of construction of categories for the understanding of the context in which their formative activities take place. This allows us to regard teacher development as a space of instability and recategorizations, a characteristic which contrasts with static or pre-established conceptions of teaching and learning as a set of practices defined by methodological principles. In a different sense, the context of teacher education is regarded as resulting from intersubjective relationships in which effects of objectivity are produced (Mondada, 2002, p. 119).

In this respect, the data here analyzed show how the research participants retrieve memories from their school experiences concerning teaching and learning and use them as the foundation to elaborate their concepts of teacher education and the projections of their self-images as future teachers.

METHODOLOGICAL RATIONALE AND THE PREPARATION OF THE CORPUS FOR ANALYSIS

This study has an exploratory-interpretive nature and a multi-sited, multiple-case design that investigated teacher education processes within an institutional program developed in a state university in São Paulo. Four case studies of individual pre-service portuguese language teachers were conducted in three different peripheral state schools in the city of São Paulo, where the participants had their initial teaching experiences as interns.

The study used a multimodal approach for data collection and included three main methods, all of them based on interviews conducted with the research participants. The first method, called tree of life (TOL) (Merryfield, 1993), is autobiographical. Prior to the interview, the participants were asked to draw a tree containing three parts: the roots, where they would name the people, events, and ideas that had contributed to their decision to choose teaching as a profession; the trunk, where the participants would indicate their skills, interests, interpersonal relationships, and the events which were useful for them to make their career choices; and, finally, the branches, where they would outline their expectations and viewpoints that could somehow anticipate the possible ways in which their teaching careers would develop. This first set of data was collected before the participants started their pre-service activities in the schools.

The second method consisted of a photo driven interview (PDI), based on photographs taken by the participants during their first two weeks of activities in the schools. They were asked to take pictures of people, places, or events that drew their attention. Then, using those images as a memory recall tool, they were asked to explain why they had made each photographic record and what they meant to convey about the context through those pictures. The interpretative nature of these photos enabled the researchers to observe the context through the participants' eyes and was very useful for understanding how each of them associated symbolic and material aspects in their processes of context (re)construction.

The third method, called teaching experience recollection (TER), consisted of retrospective interviews that took place between three and four months after the pre-service teachers had begun their activities within the schools. During this period, they went to the schools at least once a week with two objectives: firstly, to become familiarized with the context by observing their supervising teachers performing their daily activities; secondly, to implement the teaching plans they had devised — individually or in pairs — during the meetings of their teacher education program at the university. In these teaching plans, all members of the program, including the research participants, were asked to propose teaching practices

which they perceived as important and necessary, but missing in the context of the school they were working. For the research interviews, the participants were asked to share their lesson plans and field journal entries, and to explain their rationales and practices, in an attempt to encourage them to theorize their practices.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. Collectively, these three methods provided the researchers with a substantial amount of data, as illustrated in the Table 1:³

Table 1 – Number of transcribed words per participant for each data collection tool.

	TOL	PDI	TER
Carmen	5.967	9.837	6.527
Edna	5.192	5.767	7.738
Gisele	4.932	4.854	6.572
Rafael	7.284	5.609	7.985

TOL: tree of life; PDI: photo driven interview; TER: teaching experience recollection.

Source: Research database.

Preparation of the authors.

Once transcribed and coded, the data were examined in order to locate themes underlying the four student-teacher narratives in each separate case. These themes were then cross-examined and re-grouped, thus forming new categories, namely,

1. access to pedagogical resources;
2. school environment (physical and psychological);
3. use of school facilities;
4. power relations;
5. educational culture and practices;
6. teacher-student relations;
7. learning environment;
8. teaching-learning, culture and practices;
9. becoming a teacher.

As a final procedure, further examination of the categories led to the identification of two major units of analysis: critiques, defined as perceptions that reveal attempts to problematize educational contexts, discourse, and practices; and educational insights, defined as perceptions that indicate enhanced understandings of educational contexts, discourse, and practices generated during the participants' activities within the schools.

Taking into account these units of analysis as well as the identity characteristics of the research participants, identified in previous stages of the research

³ Conforming to the Code of Ethics of the universities involved in this research project, the participants' names remained anonymous. The pseudonyms used here are: Carmen, Edna, Gisele, and Rafael.

(Rodrigues *et al.*, 2018), we assessed the data from two of the participants, Carmen and Rafael. Their data were selected for being contrasting cases: having gone through their pre-service activities in the same school, each of them came up with distinct understandings of their in-school formative processes. This contrast was grounded particularly in their previous schooling experiences, which were characterized as follows.

As a student, Carmen valued school as a place where students were educated and had access not only to general culture but particularly to the school culture; her father was a teacher and taught at the same school she attended; her memories of school were mostly positive, and she chose to pursue a degree in *letras* (language and literature) and work as a teacher because of the value she attached to schooling and the way she projected herself in relation to her father as a teacher (being respected; enjoying one's profession; helping others; being recognized as a professional).

With regard to the school where she carried out her practicum activities, confronted with the references she previously had, Carmen pointed out the downsides of her experience (mistrust rather than respect; surveillance rather than cooperation; compulsoriness and punishment rather than a willingness to teach and learn). Observing the activities conducted in the classroom, she adopted a deficit perspective in comparison to the school model she had in her memory. She then emphasized deficiencies such as the attitude of students (who failed to pay attention, respect their teacher, or perform their activities) and teachers (who did not feel like doing their job, who took pauses during class in order to talk to a colleague, who had a negative perception about their students and predicted poor performance in external evaluations).

On the other hand, as a student, Rafael felt ill-adapted to school. He confronted school rules and did not fit into the institutional context. The educational experiences he regarded as positive took place in a non-governmental organization (NGO) in which he had access to cultural resources that at times remained closer or farther away from the knowledge he could gain in school.

Rafael acknowledged the downsides of the school where he was doing his pre-service education activities but tried to place himself in the students' shoes in order to understand them (he seemed to project in these students the same position in which he saw himself when he was in elementary school). So, he identified problems but was able to relate to them and sometimes justified them because of the material and structural conditions of the school. When he observed his practices during his practicum, he felt optimistic. In his view, if part of the students did not engage in the proposed tasks, they would do so along the way; if a specific activity did not appeal to students at a given time, it was still possible to redesign it, trying to get them involved in the debates (even if by doing this, curricular content was not directly addressed). So, he had a positive outlook on the setbacks and problems that he faced in the school context.

By contrasting these two cases, we will examine in this paper the extent to which the conceptions of school and teaching that arose from these two pre-service teachers' previous schooling experiences shaped their identity as teachers. In our

analysis, we will highlight the process of construction of objects of discourse that might help us to see how the research participants relied on their previous experience and references to build their conceptualizations about portuguese language teaching. As suggested by Mondada (2002), we will attempt to explain how the references to school, teaching, and learning are socially and culturally anchored, revealing these individuals' worldviews, in a more or less objective and solidified way (Mondada, 2002, p. 121).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In order to produce the data for our analysis, we sought to observe the unique involvement of each individual with the school context, as grounded in affective or intellectual aspects. In this regard, data production was performed according to the following methodological principles:

- observing the linguistic and sociocognitive elements used by the research participants to talk about themselves or other individuals, as well as about material elements of their context;
- emphasizing the processes of lexical categorization in relation to their semantic fields of reference, focusing on “the process of adjusting words, which is not done directly regarding the referent inside the world, but within the contextual framework, in order to build the object of discourse through the referral process” (Mondada, 2002, p. 123);
- by using each methodological tool (TOL, PDI, TER) to characterize the processes whereby the participants “build flexible categories, which are *ad hoc* and useful for practical goals, and rely on the multiplicity of the subjects' viewpoints on the world rather than on restrictions imposed by the materiality of the world” (Mondada, 2002, p. 120).

The methodological procedures for data production uncover the ways in which memory and affection influence the subjective processes through which participants conceptualize the reality of their experiences.

RAFAEL AND HIS SCHOOL REFERRAL PROCESSES

In the interview with Rafael, through the use of the TOL methodological tool, we noticed the predominance of references to *school*: 36 references, as compared to *teacher*, which had 32 references. In this interview, Rafael drew on the references to *teacher*, which he had built as an elementary school student to categorize the teaching and learning conditions in the present institutional context as positive or negative. By contrasting positive and negative references, Rafael was able to categorize his experiences as a former student and pre-service teacher: his studies for the entrance exam in a preparatory course, institution, in which he had “a fantastic literature teacher”, led him to question why he had not read literary works before (“why have I not had this contact with literature

before, why have I not raised the questions that these literary works are raising before?”). Rafael developed referral processes based on the categorization, as more or less significant, of the institutional contexts in which he had participated as a school student.

The most challenging institutional contexts Rafael had faced while he was a student led him to reevaluate his conceptions about studying and learning in a school environment. He declared that he “had never had the culture of a student”, “he was never serious about studying”, since the school context he lived in was not very challenging; he did his classwork and homework relying on other people’s sources, without “a discerning revision”, which prevented him from developing his skills as a writer or as a reader. What somehow changed this perception of himself as “a disinterested student” was his participation in a school project that enabled a few students to work as assistants in institutional projects: “I guess that this made me start to reflect on my own attitude [...] that, besides being a student, there was something else in that for me, and my teachers were demanding that”.

Participating in cultural activities organized by an NGO also allowed Rafael to assign new meaning to his connection with the school and his schooling process: “that was an environment where there was more dedication [...] even more than in school, maybe. Maybe because I think it was more meaningful”. This distinct institutional context enabled him to reflect on the teaching and learning processes with which individuals might engage: “It’s somehow a challenge for my [...] work as a teacher, how to make the school space as meaningful as all external spaces”. Since he devoted himself more to the activities offered by the NGO than to the school itself, Rafael wondered about the reasons why his bonds to the institutions had been established in this way and concluded that the degree of significance which students attached to a context either facilitated or hindered their engagement with it.

Thus, participation in significant contexts was the catalyst pointed out by Rafael to indicate the moments in which his conceptions about education and schooling had been constructed in the referral processes that he developed and which had led him to pursue a teaching degree at university. His memory recollections included his Sociology teacher, who encouraged his students to think critically: “He managed to address topics and issues that made us reflect a lot about society, about the structure of the school itself, you see... subjects that I later had in my POEB [*Política e Organização da Educação Básica* — Politics and Organization of Brazilian Education] program, a course called “introduction to studies from a sociological approach”. They also included the cultural activities conducted by the NGO he took part in: “I guess I was influenced by this environment I had contact with when I was a teenager”; the preparatory course for the university exams: “It was when I found out about Literature that I made up my mind [...] I think that this intermediation is something I want to investigate, a challenge I want to face”; and, when entering university, the Language and Literature course: “I think that my trajectory has the university as a point of departure. That’s the place where I’m reflecting more and also being trained; this

is essential for me to go back to school. So, I'm always trying to take in the most I can from university". The referral process developed by Rafael to conceptualize or categorize what he understood by school, teaching, and education seemed to be rooted in memories initially considered negative. By doing so, he observed events or relationships that may lead to changes in the present or be projected towards the future.

In this process, elementary school and his school memories as a student became the objects that guided the referral processes that underlay Rafael's discourse about his teacher education. It was all about the difficulties he had had as a student: "I believe I wasn't an outstanding or dedicated student, but there are also exceptions, right?". Therefore, by the time he completed his undergraduate course, he hoped to be able to perform "a relevant job", one "which has a social impact and gives him a financial reward". The investment in his qualification would allow him to combine his interests and contributions to society: "My goal is to mature academically so that I may keep opening these doors". Once again, by assigning a different meaning to his conceptualizations of school, he evaluated the academic experience as positive, since engagement in academic research would be the basis for his actions as a teacher who turned his experience in school environments into something meaningful. The soundness of his education and training would also enable him to become a teacher in schools that offered better working conditions: "If I happen to work in a non-conventional school, then I could also shift towards research as part of my teaching practice".

The use of the PDI tool facilitated the process of looking at Rafael's references to the school. An outstanding aspect was his greater interest in the school as a formal institution (33 references), than in the teachers who work in it (16 references), in comparison to the data produced by Carmen, in which the reference to teachers (91 references) was predominant, rather than to school (23 references). In Rafael's processes of building objects of discourse, we observed that he was driven by his search of meaning, the creation of school contexts, and teaching practice which could turn out to be significant for the individuals who participated in it — in contrast with his memories of the school as a place that did not challenge students to learn, and whose teachers lacked authorship and therefore did not arouse students' interest.

A school with broken doors, vandalized toilets, and security bars similar to those in prison: this is the image that Rafael evoked of the school he had gone to as a student and saw in the one where he was doing his pre-service teaching activities. In his words, "an oft-replicated model". During his pre-service training, he pointed out the poor conditions of the school, yet he focused on its potential: "I'm saying the school conditions are poor, it is unstable and misused, but it has great potential". He also mentioned the school's infrastructure problems: "So, there are classrooms with no doors and lots of students hanging around during classes, in the halls". In his view, the existence of doors established order, a principle of organization for the educational context:

So, when you have a door, you can have a temporal division; you break the contact you have with people behind that door; you somehow manage to organize the environment to perform your activities. I believe it's important because of that.

Instead of simply referring to this aspect as something negative, an illustration of the precariousness of the school system, Rafael emphasized the structural importance of satisfactory school infrastructure. Although he faced limitations imposed by the materiality of the world (Mondada, 2002), Rafael built (flexible) categories which enabled him to conceptualize his context and project productive pedagogical actions into the future. In this sense, as pointed out in a previous study (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2018), experiences that once were regarded as negative may have a positive effect on the development of teachers in pre-service education. Taking on an ethnographic point of view, the pre-service teacher retrieves their memories not only to understand their current situation but to reinterpret and assign new values to these memories.

One of the photographs Rafael took had the blackboard as the focal point, which was, to him, “a special historical tool belonging to the physical space of the school, the support in which the words come alive”. In his process of constructing objects of discourse related to schooling, and in an attempt to devise an appealing school to those who participated in it, Rafael reflected upon the need to produce meaningful contexts, in which “words come alive”. The blackboard was the material support for “the words, and they are the basis for us to establish a dialog with students”; this meaningful artifact was, “historically, a support, a meaningful support for teachers”. But for that to happen, the blackboard must be assigned a new meaning:

many students and teachers use the blackboard in a way that I don't approve of, I've seen it a lot in my experience as a student, which is the teacher writes a medium-length or a lengthy text on the blackboard, then the student copies it, and this ends up being the only pedagogical activity. It becomes an end in itself. So, eventually, the purpose of writing is unaccomplished.

The value of writing was in allowing teachers to become authors.

Rafael made similar observations with regard to textbooks and their undeveloped potential to help create meaningful learning spaces and opportunities. He photographed textbooks that remained stored in one of the rooms of the school and were not available for student use because they had not been distributed to students yet. He wondered what he would do if he were in the teacher's — or manager's — place to ensure that these resources were well-used. In his view, “what is at stake is probably not the investment made, but the teachers being adequately trained for using this material. If people were educated to give more meaningful value to these materials, they would consequently have a wider circulation, wouldn't they?”. Once again, by assigning value to professional education and development, Rafael recategorized the objects of discourse to generate more meaningful contexts.

Aiming at enhancing his understanding of the school context, Rafael questioned the school model he had had as a student: “So, I ask the school, when will you start to change and upgrade yourself, when are you going to start deconstructing some things and building new ones, giving new meanings to the areas inside and around you?”. It is interesting to note in Rafael’s remarks that the value he assigned to the school as an institution was made explicit in the very way he addressed the institution (“So I ask the school”). In this process, people seem to be part of the institution, which is the one ensuring that formative interactions are established; therefore, the actions taken by the individuals who participate in the institution must be oriented towards transforming the school itself. In this scenario, it seems that, for Rafael, improved teaching derives from establishing meaningful contexts, which, in turn, results from the work done by teachers in changing the institutional conditions of their workplace.

The data collected from the TER tool seem to indicate Rafael’s change of perspective with regard to school, since in this case, his references to the word *teacher* (20) were much higher than to the word *school* (9).

However, following the tendency shown in previous analyses, his references to teachers were apparently made to discursively construct them as change agents within the school institutional context, making their role more meaningful. This conception of teaching derives from the counterpoint provided by Rafael in the way he referred to the relationship between his supervisor teacher and her profession:

That was something I used when reflecting about my teacher education, the way she [his supervisor teacher] used the textbook in the classroom: it looks as if the textbook was her own teaching method; like she somehow outsourced her teaching method to the textbooks.

Referring to the submission of this teacher’s practice to textbooks, Rafael emphasized authorship as the distinguishing feature in making teaching more meaningful, a similar opinion to the one he gave when talking about technological resources in the classroom.

The relationship between teachers and teaching would be one of the bases for the establishment of interactive constructive processes in the classroom. In an excerpt of the interview, Rafael criticized the attitude of the teacher who, having managed to draw the students’ attention, interrupted her class to deal with someone’s request outside the classroom; when she was back, she had trouble in resuming her activities, since the students’ involvement was gone: “She asked students for their attention twice or three times, when she finally got it and started teaching, someone knocked on the door. It was one of the secretaries, a school inspector who came to talk to her, so she answered”. For Rafael, her attitude resulted from her lack of commitment to the students, and he tried to understand what had motivated that: “This is something I reflected about, for my own education, this commitment to students in the classroom. There’s so little time, time flies, especially when we... usually... have a lesson plan, right?”.

Teacher-students interaction is portrayed as an ethical relationship which must be cared for and continuously rebuilt:

There are many people, many lives at that moment you are teaching, for you to fulfill your goal there you need... it has to be a whole sequence of stages of planning, right, preparation and also mediation. In addition, you also need to plan how you will conduct the lesson, it also has a level of complexity, and I believe you need to build that foundation.

According to the data analyzed, the way Rafael recategorized his experiences as a pre-service teacher seems to derive from contrasting them to the practices he regarded as unsatisfactory. He characterized such practices based on his student memories or on what he observed within the context of the school where he was performing his practicum activities. As a counterpoint to his somewhat ethnographic observations of meaninglessness, he projected other ways of acting that could significantly constitute the institutional contexts of teaching.

CARMEN AND THE TEACHER AT THE CORE OF HER REFERRAL PROCESSES

According to the data collected with the TOL tool, the 76 references Carmen made to *teacher*, as opposed to the 30 references to *school*, were initially based on the categorization of those she referred to as “important teachers” throughout her training and education period. In this initial categorization, the combination between the personal qualities of these teachers and their pedagogical knowledge was emphasized through the use of expressions such as: “teaching very affectionately”, “showing tenderness”, “my students’ eyes glowed [when she talked about a specific subject]”, teaching in a way “that the contents studied don’t get boring” and the class “becomes more fun”, and giving the students “more freedom so we can talk and read whatever we want”. Carmen, therefore, assumes that the contents taught, including less appealing or interesting topics, can be improved by the affection teachers dedicate to professional practice.

This reference to affection as an action modulator suggests that affection is an innate quality, that is, one may either have it or not. However, Carmen’s view changed when she resorted to the idea of a long stay in a given school context and thus added a temporal characteristic to this referral process. Talking about one of these “important teachers”, Carmen said that “she was one of those teachers who have a super background, she’s been in that school for many years, she’s one of the longest-standing teachers in that school, and she keeps working there”.

In her process of assigning new meanings to define what these “important teachers” were like, Carmen returns to the figure of her father, who was also a teacher, and by mentioning him, she reiterated and broadened the relationship between affection and the unfolding of professional practice over time. Carmen stated that she had always found it “very beautiful” to see her father-teacher’s emotion at the

impact he had on the lives of his students. To illustrate, she recounted memories of witnessing casual encounters between her father and his former students at the mall: “Some student coming, oh teacher! I had classes with you in 1986, and now I’m a lawyer, I graduated”; or at school parties: “then people came to him, ‘Oh, teacher, I finished high school’, ‘teacher, I went to college’, then he got all sentimental, then ‘Oh no, teacher, don’t cry’, and so on. My father gets very emotional when he meets a former student”. In the data, when Carmen referred to memories of her father-teacher, she used strong affectionate expressions, such as “I always liked to see”, “I always found it very beautiful”, “I always found it very cool”, “I always said, ‘Wow, that’s so cool!’” or “I thought it was very beautiful”.

Some other attributes of these “important teachers” from Carmen’s school background, such as “a cool person”, “someone you can trust”, were related to the reverence for the affectionate image of her father-teacher, leading to the notion of the teacher as a friend: “this interaction between teacher and students, I think it’s more helpful when the teacher is a friend than when he is picky, boring. I guess this helps to win over the students”. Moreover, according to Carmen, for teachers to be able to “win over”, to establish bonds, they needed an attribute which was less temporal and rather innate: they needed “to have a knack for it”. In order to establish this reference, she mentioned another member of her family, her younger sister: “I think she will become a teacher too, she also has a knack for helping people”.

After this initial stage, in which she related to fond memories of “important teachers”, Carmen started talking about the present. The affection for the profession motivated her choice, and now she can see herself as a teacher. Here, the objects of discourse were built in a different way. Carmen left affection in the background and anchored herself on a sort of rationality, which made herself experience feelings of absence, lack, or deficiency. This became clear when she uses self-referential expressions, such as “I need to study more”, “I need to go deeper into this”, “I’m interested in studying more”, “reading and researching”, “I wish I could go deeper into this”, “I’d never thought about it”, and “there is so much to learn”. This momentary fixation on the perception of not knowing was soon reconfigured when Carmen talked about her performance during three years as an assistant teacher in a school that provided tutoring classes for students. Describing her performance, she declared being in a place where she could “experience”: “It’s as if it were another... we do the things that parents can’t do [helping their kids in their studies] because they’re working” and “I once had a student who was deaf, another one with, I can’t remember, I guess it was autism. They assigned me to tutor a student, and I had to find ways to help them understand”. In such a heterogeneous context, Carmen was willing to promote authentic learning, and relied on knowledge — rather than on personal attributes or qualities — as a way out of the locus of not-knowing:

I wanted to go deeper into it because it interests me, and I felt some... some sort of regret because I wasn’t able to make him understand something that

wasn't... it wasn't that difficult; he would have been able to understand if he hadn't that condition. But he wouldn't make progress; he was stuck.

Therefore, the know-how started changing the image of the teacher which Carmen created for herself, and she saw herself halfway between two alternatives: on the one hand, creating her methodology, "not only those we see in doctoral theses and books, but I want to develop something of my own"; on the other hand, experimenting techniques and methodologies developed by other teachers: "I enjoy going back to a specific content I had [in college] and trying to apply it to my students; by doing so, I 'steal' ideas from my teachers, and apply them to my students".

Her concern with pedagogical know-how changed once again when Carmen reestablished a connection between the teacher's performance and her affectionate memories by stating that "some teachers just don't manage to captivate their students; they arrive, give their classes, and leave. And the ability to captivate is one of the most precious attributes of a teacher". And this near-absolute realization placed Carmen in a moral dilemma:

I'm afraid of failing, I'm afraid of not being able to transmit knowledge, that they [the students] leave school just like they started it, that they learn nothing. Or that they learn only to be able to pass the exams.

Through this account, we see Carmen combining affection and the references she retrieved from her memory to create her teacher identity. Starting from a categorization marked by affective memories that helped her define who her "important teachers" had been and what they had been like, she transitioned towards an elaboration in which the relationship with professional knowledge stood out in the understanding of what teachers did and how they acted, and consequently, how she intended to be and act as a teacher.

In the data collected through the PDI, Carmen's 23 references to *school* depicted in the photographs were articulated through her 91 references to different *teachers*: the teacher with whom Carmen interacted when she first arrived at the school, other teachers in this school, her old teachers, and the current ones at the university. The school portrayed by Carmen in photographs of security bars, warehouses for the storage of books, barely furnished classrooms, empty halls, and bare walls was defined as a "non-place". In her words, "to me, it looked just like an abandoned school, a ghost hall, no one was around. I find it really sad looking at the walls with no posters, without something that might indicate the presence of students around". "No one takes care of it, not even the students enjoy being in the school", "they throw things on the floor, pieces of paper, snacks, that kind of thing". And this "non-place" showed signs of "non-action": "This is just one more warehouse, but in this case it's even sadder because these books should have been distributed to them [the students], they are supposed to receive these books, but this doesn't happen".

Carmen explained this sadness that came from being confronted with the void, the lack of evidence of knowledge production in that space by conjuring up the school image she had built when recollecting her school process: “In the school I attended, I used to see lots of things hanging on the walls. So, it’s really odd not to have a bulletin board in the classroom with notices about field trips or exam dates, or even some work produced by the students”. This contrast between two very distinct images of schools made her evaluate the school as “not a cool place to be around”.

In this “non-place”, which was in conflict with her affective memory of school, Carmen noticed that the teacher-student relationship was also hollow and mechanical: “So, when the teacher tells students that they’ll have to work on a project for which they will get a grade, they stop and pay attention”; and “the teacher simply said, ‘Ah, the topic [you’ll be working on] is metonymy’, that was the only instruction they were given, then she teacher gave an example ‘Oh, just like [the language of] the traffic signs’, and that was it. And then everyone in class did their work on traffic signs”. This relationship thus turned students into mere traders of assessment grades: “‘Teacher, give me higher mark!’ They keep begging for a better grade”.

Whereas in Carmen’s first categorization she placed the responsibility for the lack of purpose of school onto the school itself as a public apparatus and onto students, she soon changed the way she discursively constructed the object by describing an event in which “the teacher had managed to take control of her students and have them perform the task, and it looked like the class was finally about to start. We were very excited”. However, they were soon let down: “Then someone arrived and started to talk to the teacher, by the classroom door, and they kept talking for 15 minutes [...]. The students were about to start paying attention when the class was over. But it had barely begun”.

The fact that Carmen blamed the teacher for the failure in the pedagogical relationship became even more emphatic when she described what she defined as the teacher’s only strategy used in classes: copying. In her words, “for Portuguese lessons, it’s always like that, copying this and that exercise, it’s always this business of copying, sometimes they copy, maybe, a text, an article from a newspaper, something like that. This is their task. Copying a poem, copying a little joke”.

This teacher, so unlike the image of teacher Carmen brought from her experience as a student and her projection of what kind of professional she wanted to be, was then condemned: “I guess the problem is not, not, it’s not them [the students]. Sometimes, the problem is the teacher herself”. But the condemnation did not last long; it got diluted as Carmen, as an ethnographic observer, started considering the material working conditions in the school: “The only wall socket we have is that one on the ceiling, and we just can’t climb a ladder to plug our appliances in [...] the radio, the computer, the overhead projector, for example... because that’s the only wall socket”. This process of blaming the teacher also got diluted when Carmen placed part of this responsibility on the students: “on that day, the rowdy boys were not around, but the

girls simply didn't care [about the class]. The teacher went on with her class, and the girls were painting their fingernails. They just didn't care; it was as if nothing was happening”.

In an attempt to move away from the pendulum in which she sometimes blamed the teacher, sometimes the school, sometimes the students, Carmen pondered two aspects: “When they [the students] are having a lesson with *a teacher* who likes them and likes the job, they pay attention”, and “*the school* could somehow be improved if *they* [school staff] took care of it, and did some renovation, something like hanging some posters and *students'* works on the walls, the place would start looking like a school, rather than a prison”. It is noteworthy how Carmen used general categories (as indicated by the words highlighted in italics) in her descriptions in order to point out the transformative potential of that school, initially characterized as a “non-place”.

We also underline that the conflict between what Carmen experiences in her current school and her school experience as a student seemed to give the meaning-making process some referential stability through negative lenses, characterizing what she currently lived as incomprehensible, or hard to fit into one single category: “I get sort of... I find it odd because when I was a student, it wasn't like that. Our relationship was very different. I find it strange, like, wow!”.

Carmen's attempts, as a socially and culturally involved individual, to put into words how her references to school, teachers, and students were produced, reveal the multiplicity, transience, and uncertainty in the construction of the image of an accomplished teacher who performs her activities within the specificities of a given school context. This process demanded that she resorted to her memories to understand her present context, according to an ethnographic principle. It also made her reassess her memories and values, which enabled her to understand the working conditions under which her professional education was taking place.

This complex frame of reference, which was categorical when Carmen first voiced it and right afterward became partial, insufficient, and subject to changes, was summed up in the data collected with the TER tool. By describing her first steps in planning and conducting her pedagogical work in the same school and classrooms which she got to know as a critical and active observer, Carmen seemed to seek some balance in the references to *teacher* and *school*, with 36 references to the former, and 23 to the latter. From this conflicting experience, anchored in different references to realities experienced in a chronological and synchronic way, her purpose was materialized in her discourse in two distinct ways: one in which Carmen talked about herself as a teacher today, identifying and rooting her changing state in what she had done as an assistant teacher in a school that provided tutoring classes for students: “I've already started letting them [the students] talk [...] develop their thinking, trying not to force them”; the other in which she connected her image as a school teacher as “something-to-be”, in an attempt to distinguish herself from what she characterized as a *teacher* based on her experience in the school where her professional education was taking place:

So, I guess that when I have my own class to teach, I'll do my best not to act like that, not to say things like, 'No, you said it wrong, this is not the way we speak', to avoid correcting students in front of the class, or keep saying 'come one, let's copy this', to avoid assigning copying tasks to them, so that it can be an interactive class, in which they can participate.

CONCLUSIONS

Having an inner dialog and interacting with their memories, Carmen and Rafael built their subjective conceptualizations of the world and externalized them as objects of discourse. Their accounts reveal the way they referred to the *school* and the *teacher*, in an attempt to combine contradictions, thus creating a state of temporary stability for their professional practice. In spite of the singularities in the processes of each research participant, they both stated, restated, expanded on, and explained meaningful school experiences.

For Carmen, since the school she had attended and her former teachers were diametrically opposed to those she observed in her present experience, the referral process that shaped her conceptualizations about the world kept oscillating between blaming someone (generally, the teacher) for the meaninglessness of what she saw and putting herself in this person's place in order to reevaluate her interpretation and judgment. In this sense, Carmen's referral process was characterized by doubts, in that the idealization of her own experience as a student, which was strongly influenced by affection, became predominant. For her, the life and meaning of the school rested in interpersonal relationships, which made her put the figure of the teacher and the appreciation of the personal, human aspect of teaching, at the center of her meaning-making process of what a school was.

For Rafael, the sensation of revisiting something well-known (the school he observed today was akin to the one he had attended as a student; the teachers with whom he was working now were similar to most of his teachers in elementary and middle school) made him construct images of schools and teachers in a positive way; he regarded whatever gaps he identified at present or in his memories as meaningful. In other words, underlying his complex referral process was his certainty that schools may and must be different. Therefore, Rafael used the educational theories that were the basis for his education as a source for retrieving the tools that enabled his process of transformation. For him, the school needed to be a place that provided a meaningful relationship with knowledge, hence the centrality of references to the school as an institution built by people, particularly teachers. The presence of the other, named and referenced either centrally or peripherally, sometimes as a teacher, sometimes as a school, in Carmen and Rafael's intrasubjective process reveals instability and change not as problems but as intrinsic dimensions of discursive production and situated cognition (Mondada, 2002, p. 124). Such instability in identifying discrete

objects can also be observed at a non-linguistic level (or at least at a cognitive level where verbalization is neither necessary nor explicit) in everyday practices. Namely, individual cognitive activity is also a continuous activity of categorization, rather than the simple identification and recognition of pre-existing objects. Categorization depends on a non-exhaustive and selective treatment of the world, which is susceptible to change and transformation of either its finalities or adaptive modalities.

Considering that referral processes are based on people's previous knowledge and the images associated with the memories of their experiences, any pre-service teacher's construction of objects of discourse and categorization processes are always unique, as a response to the constitutive singularity of the individual. This observation highlights the impossibility of teacher education processes intended as instrumental, standardizing, or normative, since the resources which different pre-service teachers bring to their professional education are characterized by heterogeneity and instability.

By understanding instability as constitutive of individuals, we are compelled to rethink the definition of quality of education for both teachers and students. Since it is a situated phenomenon, whose existence cannot precede the people who construct it, the quality of the school experience cannot be reduced to the efficiency of learning, nor can the success of teaching be linked to the effectiveness of teaching techniques. In this regard, teacher education is characterized as an ethnographic process, which allows pre-service teachers to know and interpret the context in which they act, resignifying it. It also allows teachers-to-be to redefine what teaching and schooling represent based on the very memory-based representations (intellectual, affective) which they bring to the process.

The analyses of the processes experienced by the research participants illustrate the complex weaving construction of teacher identities. Their singularities reveal that identities can be at the same time permanently unstable and constantly committed to democratic values and the reduction of social inequalities.

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