

Comunidades de práctica y Desarrollo profesional docente

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Resumen

El objetivo del estudio es comprender los procesos de autoformación en el contexto de los grupos cooperativos del Movimiento de la Escuela Moderna (MEM¹) portugués y su impacto en el desarrollo profesional docente. Teniendo en cuenta el objeto de estudio utilizamos una metodología cualitativa e como técnica de recolección de datos la entrevista semiestructurada. Los resultados apoyan la conclusión de que el trabajo cooperativo facilita el desarrollo profesional de los docentes, mediante el aumento de la competencia de reflexión sobre la práctica pedagógica, así como el desarrollo de otras habilidades esenciales para la praxis docente.

Palabras clave: Desarrollo profesional docente, Identidad profesional, Movimiento de la Escuela Moderna, Trabajo cooperativo, Práctica reflexiva.

Community of Practice and Teacher's Professional Development

Abstract

The aim of this study is to understand the cooperative self-training processes in the context of cooperative groups of the Portuguese Modern School Movement (MEM²) and their impact on the professional development of teachers. Keeping the subject of study as a reference, we use a

qualitative methodology and give preference to the semi-structured interview as the data collection technique. The results support the conclusion that cooperative work promotes the professional development of teachers, by increasing the competence of reflection on pedagogical practice as well as developing other skills essential for teaching practice.

Keywords: Teacher's professional development, Professional identity, Modern School Movement, Cooperative work, Reflective practice.

INTRODUCTION

The complexity of roles teachers have to play nowadays in schools, requested by the needs of the school community, requires training that cannot be limited to their initial training, but to a continuous training which should be complemented and built throughout life. Teacher education should consist of a constant development in all dimensions, personal, professional and social.

The demands of today's society towards schools, also implies exigencies for teachers, their training and their practices. In this context, it is urgent to consider the importance of reflecting on the teaching profession, which is one of the axes of professionalism, on what is being a teacher, or, in the perspective of Roldão (1999), to see teachers as education professionals. Increasingly, teachers are invited to reflect on their practice in order to perfect it and to make the learning process more meaningful for their students.

A sustained reflective practice in cooperation with peers can contribute to the development of professional skills, answering, in a more adequate and shared manner, to the emerging problems in their professional everyday life.

In this context increases the importance of teachers becoming integrated in working groups where they can grow professionally in cooperation with more experienced colleagues and where sharing of reflection is stimulated.

In fact, the importance of collaborative work among teachers has been highlighted in recent years, relating to mutual support (Carneiro, Geller & Nitzke, 1999), everyone working in order to achieve objectives pre defined among them and to obtain professional skills more appropri-

ate to new social demands. Although individual working practices are still tempting for some teachers in Portugal, there is nowadays a greater tendency for collaborative working practices in schools or in training groups organized by teachers' associations.

It is within this theme that the interest in this study that aims to understand the cooperative self-formation processes in the context of a cooperative group of Portuguese MEM (Modern School Movement) and its impact on the professional development of teachers. Taking into account the object of study, the following issues were identified:

i) What motivations caused teachers to integrate cooperative groups of MEM? ii) How is cooperative self-training organized and developed in the cooperative groups of MEM? iii) What are the positive aspects or constraints identified by teachers in the work in cooperative groups? iv) What is the impact of the experiments conducted in the context of cooperative groups for teachers' professional development? To this end, we benefited by the participation of six teachers belonging to a cooperative group of MEM.

1. THEORETICAL GROUNDS

1.1. A Perspective on the Professional Development of Teachers

Being a teacher today involves the learning of a profession characterized by very different types of knowledge. It implies a complex life spent in a constant quest for improvement and in multidimensional ways of acting and thinking (Pacheco, 2003).

To give an informed, apposite response to the multiplicity of situations with which he is confronted, the teacher should adopt the stance of student, from the beginning of his career until his retirement, regarding professional development as a learning rather than as a remedial process (Morais & Medeiros, 2007). For Oliveira-Formosinho (2009:225), professional development is a more integrated, communal process" thus rejecting the purely individualist perspective.

To this end it becomes essential that the teacher be aware of the need to improve his professional and personal skills (Marcelo, 2009). In this respect, and in the view of Day (2001), it is fundamental that the teacher participate in his own personal and professional development throughout his entire career as a basic prerequisite if he wants to perform

and be recognized as a competent professional. In our view, the professional development of teachers should take place in a constructivist atmosphere, along logically contextualized lines, and be related to processes of school reform through reflective practices, whenever possible in collaboration and cooperation with peers.

Initiatives for teacher development should therefore help teachers to “acquire and develop strategies for teaching and techniques that promote the effective and active construction of student learning and autonomy” (Morais & Medeiros, 2007:35).

1.2. Learning as Social Practice

Studying learning as a social practice means broadening the conceptual framework developed by Lave & Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). We share these authors’ perspective on learning, according to which the storage of information is but a small part of knowledge and that knowledge involves above all an active participation in social communities, i.e. involvement in the social world.

Social learning is thus reflected in social practice through social relationships created through interaction and socialization, and hence the development of knowledge and practices.

To consider learning as centred on social practice is a far wider-reaching concept than the conventional concept of “learning by doing”.

In this sense, the cooperative groups of MEM are in essence a space for teachers to participate in social communities and to come together to find solutions to problems arising from their day-to-day professional lives.

Collaborative and cooperative activity in these groups presupposes the construction of a shared reality, bound by a common belief in the importance of reflective processes in the resolution of problems and the control of learning.

1.3. The Cooperative group as a Community of Practice

When we consider the cooperative group as the group under analysis, it is important to stress that what unites its members is the work carried out systematically by the different members of the group, which has two main objectives: learning (concepts, techniques and attitudes) and building the identity of each of the trainees both as a person and a teacher, while at the same time building the identity of the group.

The *modus operandi* of this community is based on the principles of the MEM, i.e. self-study shared through reflection.

In this respect, learning involves practice (learning by doing), community (learning by belonging) and meaning (learning by experience).

To further endorse Wenger (2011), there are three dimensions essential to a definition of a Community of Practice. The first concerns commitment, because practice is not something abstract, given that the members commit themselves to particular actions or common ideas. The second has to do with the “joint venture”, since its importance is frequently renegotiated by each of its members, thus creating a sense of responsibility among the participants. The final dimension concerns the shared repertory, i.e. the routines, instruments, *modus operandi*, symbols, actions or concepts that the community draws up or adopts in the course of its operation.

The most important aspect of the community of practice are the contents, that is learning as an experience through processes of negotiation and renegotiation, of the meaning of and modifications to the individual skills, abilities and knowledge that can affect individual’s sense of belonging to the community. When considering the community as “that which constitutes the social web of learning” (Lave & Wenger, 1991), integration only becomes possible because over time the teacher increases his sense of belonging to this community; he constructs his professional identity based on multiple reflections; and discovers a *raison d’être* for his profession by developing his practice along the lines of the MEM model.

The negotiation and the work balance produced by the various members of the community means that its members experience a sense of belonging in which everyone has an important role, both in the development of individuals and that of the community itself.

The relationships and experiences generated among the members of the group make for the creation of a shared repertory and, as a result, for the production of professional knowledge (Du Four, Du Four & Eaker, 2008).

2. METHODOLOGY

According to the theme and the purpose of this research, we made the option for a study of qualitative and interpretative nature.

It was our intention to enter the personal world of the individuals in order to understand the meaning that these teachers give to their different experiences. Given this objective, an epistemological position seemed appropriate whose special interest would be to access the meaning of the actions of the individuals (Erikson, 1986). We chose a methodological perspective seeking to “(...) to investigate ideas and find meanings in the individual actions and their social interactions from the perspective of the actors involved in the process” (Coutinho, 2011:26). It is a perspective that focuses on the description and understanding of what is unique and special in the individuals and not of what can be generalized.

In this study participated 12 teachers of the 1st cycle of basic education, elements of a cooperative group of MEM. All teachers were invited to participate in the study.

All participants have a degree for teaching the 1st Cycle of Basic Education. The teachers' ages were between 30 and 56 years. Only two elements were male. Three teachers teach in public schools and the others develop their teaching activity in private and cooperative schools. All of them integrated the cooperative group of MEM for the first time. They justified their integration in the group for the need to improve their professional practice.

The data collection technique used was semi-structured interviews and data processing was performed using the content analysis, according to the premises suggested by Bardin (2013).

3. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Results will be presented taking as reference the issues of the study.

3.1. Motivation for Joining the Cooperative Groups of MEM

Having completed their initial training, young professionals are faced with the reality of the teaching profession, having to solve, often without support, emerging problems of their professional everyday life. These difficulties lead teachers to seek support and assistance in cooperative groups of MEM, once they feel that there they may develop their teaching in a more monitored and supported way. In fact, these groups are privileged spaces for training, where teachers evaluate and plan their school intervention practices, build and share pedagogical didactic work

instruments, reflect and deepen their practices in the light of the theoretical constructs of Educational Sciences.

Another motivation teachers have for joining cooperative groups is because they identify themselves with the educational principles of MEM. This movement aims, through the action of the teachers that integrate it, to assure the democratic formation and socio moral development of their students, ensuring their full participation in the management of the school curriculum.

Finally, the possibility of improving their professional practice through a shared reflection with other teachers, based on a cooperative self-training system. In these teachers perspective, reflection is the best way to develop their professional and personal competence (Marcelo, 2009). So they transform a collective experience into professional knowledge.

3.2. Organization and Development of Cooperated Self-training in the Cooperative Groups of MEM

The work of the group is planned in a cooperative way, at the beginning of the school year, by the teachers. Teachers take on, among themselves, individual or social commitments. The first refer to the preparation of a discussion of a certain issue or by bringing from their classrooms teaching and learning materials to be analyzed with the group members. Regarding the social commitments, the group or members of the group, develop during the year one or more subjects in order to make them a social product, susceptible to be transmitted to all members in the Congress, and / or to be disclosed in a paper or article.

In this way, teachers share with other teachers, material didactic resources, pedagogic and working strategies that can be used in classroom with their students. Sometimes the elements of the cooperative group develop research projects within the group, which makes both the group and the individual, develop in the professional field. The work developed in the group is based on the isomorphic model, that is, teachers are trained from a system inspired by the same concepts and principles that the teacher in training will later use with their own students (Niza, 1997).

3.3. Belonging to Cooperative Groups of MEM: Positive Aspects and Constraints

The positive aspects, identified by these teachers of their integration in the cooperative group, relate mainly to the improvement and reflection on their pedagogical teaching. It is through this joint reflection that teacher's progress. From the perspective of the participants in this study, this reflective practice helps teachers to develop better founded actions, through the theoretical justification of their practice and contributes not to let them annihilate themselves emotionally and improves their intervention practices skills with students (Zeichner, 1993).

The formality of the cooperative group is also recognized as positive as it marks the commitment between all the elements, causing the group to advance. Another aspect to highlight is the total sharing among group members, apprehensions and practices and learning processes that facilitate the development of teaching skills and ultimately of the professional development.

As a negative aspect, teachers of this study identify temporal incompatibilities between their professional and personal lives and the fact that they have to provide time for their training in cooperative groups. This aspect leads sometimes to the withdrawal of some elements, a situation that also has consequences for the group related to its loss of identity, as each teacher is a crucial and unique piece and contributes to the good functioning of the cooperative group.

Nevertheless, to remain in the group is perceived by participants as an ethical duty because as learning is done in a group, it is consensual that teachers should remain so as to teach what they have learned to those beginning.

3.4. The Impact of the Experiments Conducted in the Context of Cooperative Groups in Teachers' Professional Development

Participants in this study are of the opinion that this training model gave them more professional security by allowing them to develop collaboration and cooperation, so as to go forth in a supported, grounded and therefore reassuring way. On the contrary, an individual journey would be much more painful and difficult, given the problems and the current demands on teachers and schools.

Reflecting on practice is essential for the personal and professional development of the teacher, as it promotes questioning on what is taught and why it is taught in a way and not in another. Data analysis enables to add that reflection on one's own practice has greater emphasis when accompanied by written narratives or diaries and the collective reflection, as when writing teachers become more aware of their learning process. However, for sharing reflection, it is essential to respect oneself and the others, to have affection, mutual support and a good environment in which to speak openly.

For this, teachers should feel at ease in an affective and welcoming environment so as to be able to expose their weaknesses and constraints.

Also, experiments have proved to be more consistent when the experienced elements of the group are attentive and cooperating. The fact that, within the cooperative group, error is considered as an enhancer of knowledge leads to the development of critical thinking. Participants in the study are also unanimous in considering, as result of their participation in cooperative groups, the improvement of their practices, embodied by their students' greater motivation for learning.

Similarly, the organization and shared management of work and relationships by the students causes to have no idle times in the classroom, and allows involvement in their own learning process, through the exercise of autonomy and responsibility.

Teachers also consider that working in cooperation within the group, allowed them to develop professional skills for teaching Portuguese and Mathematics, subjects which were, prior to their inclusion in the cooperative group, identified as those where they felt greater difficulties in identifying strategies and teaching materials for overcoming the difficulties of the students.

The reflection on the work done in cooperation preparing activities for the development of the autonomy of the students and to allow them to "learn to learn", namely the implementation of the Project Work Methodology and the Autonomous Study Time in classroom, were emphasized as positive indicators of the impact of the experiments conducted in the context of the cooperative groups for teacher performance and the resulting professional development.

The development of professional skills regarding the implementation of diversified pedagogical teaching in the classroom with stu-

dents is also stated as a positive impact. Indeed, they now feel more prepared and to have in mind the students' different timings and learning styles, their interests and experiences and to respect in their action that "pedagogical differentiation is a right to which students should have access" (Niza, 2012).

In this way, these teachers corroborate the perspective of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999: 280) considering that by cooperating they developed professionally and in collective and collaborative communities they built significant knowledge.

3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The training model followed by these teachers in MEM cooperative groups takes as its starting point the experience of its members, from the reflection on their lived daily experiences in the classroom with students, considering as reference the "direct democratic participation" sustained by the 'promotion of communication circuits" and by the "co-operative organization of learning work".

This pedagogical model is close to the one defended by Wenger (1998), seeking to develop significant practices and professional knowledge in the context of a "cultural and formative community". These teachers develop their professional activity being aware that their social participation is a permanent source of learning. This "practice" is characterized by the work and tasks associated with the performance of the teacher's role, and by the questioning and reflection with their peers on this practice.

This training model looks on education as a team activity in constant development, based on research, on knowledge production, referring "to complex tasks of specific symbolic analysts and not to the performance of simple and repetitive tasks, obeying the implementation of prescribed and monitored procedures" (Canário, 2007:15).

Professional development is, in this context, understood as a complex process in which teachers takes an active role in the adaptation of their practices, in an autonomous and responsible manner, through training devices involving cooperation and reflection with their peers. In this manner conditions are created for the improvement of their skills, both in teaching practice, or in other aspects of school life, with a view to the construction of teacher knowledge essential to their professional performance (Herdeiro, 2007).

Notes

1. O Movimento da Escola Moderna (MEM) é uma **Associação** Pedagógica de Professores e de outros Profissionais da Educação. Criado nos anos 60, foi formalizado juridicamente como **associação** pedagógica em 1976.
2. The Modern School Movement (MEM) is a Pedagogical Association of Teachers and other Education Professionals. Created in the 60s, it was legally formalized as educational association in 1976.

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