

The teaching profession in the voice of its union leaders

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ABSTRACT:

The article analyses the perspectives that are shared by the teachers who have union leadership roles in the two largest Teachers' Associations of Rio de Janeiro: The *Sindicato dos Professores do Rio de Janeiro* — *Sinpro-Rio* [Rio de Janeiro Teachers' Union] and the *Sindicato Estadual dos Profissionais da Educação* — *SEPE* [State Union of Education Professionals]. The former gathers teachers from private schools, while the latter encompasses teachers from the public education network. Within the scope of the analysis carried out, several issues are looked at such as: the intensification and complexification of the teaching function given the new demands of the school population; the shift towards greater professional qualification which includes the question of precarious working conditions; the circulation between the public and private teaching networks, raising the question of the widespread evasion of the profession. This whole set of issues leads us to the need to reflect on the relationships between the socio-professional status of the teaching profession and the actual undertaking of the teachers' work.

KEYWORDS:

History of the teaching profession, Teaching Associations.

The chief motivation behind this article is to analyse the perspectives shared by a specific group of Brazilian teachers about their profession, by means of collecting data and interpretations that help us understand the history of the teaching profession in Brazil and in Portugal. This approach is justified if we consider that trends can be identified relative to the transformations brought about in the teaching career, involving processes of a general character that interfere in the configuration of the school institutions, as well as the organisation of the teaching career.

Aimed at retaining a positive vision of this extremely heterogeneous professional group, we decided to listen to the voices of teachers who exercised union leadership roles in the two largest teachers' associations of Rio de Janeiro: The *Sindicato dos Professores do Rio de Janeiro — Sinpro-Rio* [Rio de Janeiro Teachers' Union] and the *Sindicato Estadual dos Profissionais da Educação — SEPE* [State Union of Education Professionals]. The former gathers teachers from private schools, while the latter encompasses teachers from the public education network. The interpretation of the selected data takes into account the dialogue of researchers of several nationalities who focus on the topic, in order to obtain a more wide-ranging analysis of the issues tackled. We conclude that some of the problems identified can be placed in processes that extrapolate the analyses carried out exclusively from the national point of view. This conclusion is based on the perception that the nation-State is, in itself, a transnational cultural

model within which the schooling of the masses and the structure of the teaching career constitute crucial devices for its legitimisation (Ó & Mendonça, 2007). On the other hand, we draw attention to the huge diversity between these professionals, seeking to show the complexity that characterises a professional class marked by heterogeneity, although submitted to institutional, political and social contexts which, in certain aspects, reveal surprising similarities, insofar as they carry the marks of their time.

It is also our intention to break away from the prescriptive tone, as well as a certain homogenising discourse that in some cases has characterised the narratives on the teaching profession, especially those coming from the written press and government agencies. Likewise, it is important to surpass the common sense simplistic visions that, in general, blame the teachers for the poor performance of our schools. From the point of view of academic production, we consider it necessary to adopt an analysis perspective that articulates the empirical observation with the explanations of a more general character about the actions and representations in relation to teachers.

Facing up to this challenge implies considering the interaction between the different aspects that come into play in the construction of the professional identity of teachers (Dubar, 2005), such as their institutional insertion; position in the professional hierarchy and political conceptions, among others. Therefore, in deciding to observe the shared visions with regard to the teaching profession, we

are opting to highlight the action of the teachers in their choices and rejections, as well as to understand their attitudes and possible omissions as active and dynamic (and therefore positive) processes of affirmation of their individual and professional autonomy, encompassing all the contradictions and ambiguities that may derive from these processes.

THE PROFESSION AND THE TEACHING ASSOCIATIONS IN BRAZIL AND IN PORTUGAL: PRELIMINARY NOTES

Based on a preliminary collection of data, we can note some common characteristics concerning the academic studies on the teaching profession that have been carried out in Brazil and Portugal. In both countries attention is drawn to the high quantity of work focused on the teaching profession, be it in relation to its history or be it in relation to its condition nowadays. In the Brazilian academic production, one can see greater focus on studies regarding teacher training, rather than studies on the professional career, working conditions or strategies of teaching associations¹.

Likewise in Portugal, the analysis carried out by Áurea Adão (1993) showed that the concerns about training exceeded the interest in studying teaching associations, although this latter topic was present in more wide-ranging studies, but within the scope of the analyses, they end up attributing special attention to the association experiences, as shown by the studies of Fernandes (1987); Nóvoa (1987) and Adão (1984), among others.

Another common aspect of the production on the teaching profession is the preponderance of studies focusing on the first segment of fundamental teaching (administered by the so-called *primary teachers*), relegating the study of middle education (administered by the *secondary teachers*), into the background. In the Portuguese case, in which a lot of weight is attached to the advances made in educational research from 1993 up until today, we see as Adão points out (1993, p. 124) that

(...) with regard to the history of the secondary school teacher's professional status, one can affirm

that it is yet to be elaborated, apart from sporadic aspects covering short periods, inserted in general work on secondary school teaching (Valente, 1973; Adão, 1982). In contrast, the training of these teachers and their associations has been the object of studies carried out by Ferreira Gomes (1974) and Gomes Bento (1972-3-8).

One can concisely identify some relevant experiences in the history of Portuguese teachers' associations. In the 19th century the *Associação dos Professores* [Association of Teachers], founded in 1854, played a significant role, gathering teachers from all teaching levels with markedly mutualist characteristics. From the 20th century onwards associations began to emerge for each level of education, with pride of place going to the *Associação do Magistério Secundário Oficial* [Association of Official Secondary Education Teachers], created in 1904 to represent the interests of the secondary school teachers (which would undergo many transformations) and the *União do Professorado Primário Português* [Union of Portuguese Primary Teachers], created in 1918 and disbanded in 1927, owing to the repression exercised by the Salazar regime. In 1939 the *Sindicato Nacional dos Professores do Ensino Particular* [National Union of Private Education Teachers] was created, submitted to the corporative policy of Salazar's new State, although it could be seen as an expression of the quest to achieve autonomy by the teachers it gathered, in a climate of limitations imposed by the political regime in force at the time (Pintassilgo, 2007, pp. 12-13). Finally, it is pointed out that the mobilisation of the secondary school teachers found a sphere propitious for their collective organisation in the *Grupos de Estudos do Pessoal Docente do Ensino Secundário e Preparatório — GEPDES* [Study Groups of Secondary and Preparatory Education Teaching Staff]², which was extended through the process of transition marked by the succession of Provisional Governments until the promulgation of the Republican Constitution on 2 April 1976. This gave rise to the organisation of several teachers' unions in the country.

In Brazil the studies on teaching associations concentrate above all on the decades of the 1930s-1940s and 1970s-1980s. This is because the 1930s witnessed the effort to create and control the union

organisations by the Vargas Government, while the 1970s brought the so-called *new Brazilian unionism*, geared towards the quest for autonomy in relation to the government and greater representation for the class and in society in general. The organisation of the *Sindicato dos Professores da rede privada* — *SINPRO-RIO* [Teachers' Union of the private network], and the *União dos Professores Públicos do Rio de Janeiro* — *UPPE* [Union of Public Rio de Janeiro Teachers] date back to the 1930s-1940s, while the process of the institutionalisation of the State Union of Education Professionals (SEPE) took place in the 1970s, while the military regime was still in force. The formation of a union entity at nationwide level came about through the union organisation movements of several professional categories, and was also linked to the movements opposing the authoritarian regime in Brazil, deriving from the political-military movement of 1964³.

This last aspect involves a relationship with a more general movement — which occurred both in Brazil and Portugal during the 1970s — contesting the extremely centralised and authoritarian control of the State, in tandem with a movement of expanding social demands through the enlargement of schooling opportunities⁴.

The undertaking of compared studies within the scope of the history of teachers' associations in Brazil and Portugal (Xavier, 2008) allows us to formulate the hypothesis that the moments of political breakthroughs — especially the processes of reestablishment of democratic life in Brazil and Portugal in the 1970s — led to advances in the process of organisation of associations among teachers of different institutional education levels, in turn leading to the construction of new dynamics in the field of power relations, expressed in the opening of channels of communication and information exchange, and debating of ideas as regards the political and professional situation of the teachers.

More recent interviews with Brazilian union leader teachers have revealed, moreover, relevant aspects of a shared perception of the teaching profession by these leaders. The words of the interviewees express the quest for more professional qualification, which involves issues of precarious working conditions; circulation between public and private teaching networks, raising the question of the widespread evasion

of the profession. This whole set of questions calls for the need for a reflection on the relationships between the socio-professional status of the teaching profession and the actual undertaking of the teacher's function (Dubet, 2002), as we intend to show based on the analysis of the interviews carried out.

We consider that the association experience reinforces the feeling of collective belonging and hones the ability to formulate conceptions and explanations about the teaching profession, as well as paving the way for functional and effective channels of collective communication. On this topic, the writings of some teachers who took part in association movements show us the importance of this kind of experience in their professional careers, not to mention the impact on the collective career. This is shown in the reading of the book by the Portuguese teacher Gomes Bento (1973), who took part in the *Study Groups*. Right at the start in the *Presentation* the author calls for the teachers to “appropriate their common memories (...)” so as to avoid that, “disintegrated from a common solidarity they only transmit to others the image of their nothingness” (Bento, 1973, p. 6). Through these words the author emphasises the importance of the preservation of memory, as well as the effort to guarantee their visibility in order to encourage the construction of a *positive* image of the teaching profession. He also highlights the value of disseminating the memory of the struggles of the class, linked to the idea that sharing a collective self-representation of the teaching profession impacts on the power relations, strengthening the autonomy and social relevance of the whole class.

As can be seen, the collective dimension of the profession occupies a major role in the construction of identity traits that encompass aspects such as autonomy and solidarity, sharing and common struggle, union and joining active projects to boost one's career, working conditions and socialisation. As such, we draw attention to the potential that the analysis of the interviews with the actors involved contains for the researcher, from the perspective of capturing what the teachers themselves say about the profession they exercise. At the end of the day, who better than the teachers themselves can describe the pitfalls and the field of possibilities that make up their profession?

THE TEACHING PROFESSION IN THE VOICE OF THEIR UNION LEADERS

From the set of interviews carried out with members of the management of SEPE and SINPRO-Rio⁵, one facet of information catches the attention: the challenges that the teaching profession faces are not the same for the whole of this professional class and encompass varying conditions as regards professional upgrading, career planning, resources and material infrastructures and the pedagogy of schools.

In hostile conditions the teachers work as employees paid on an hourly basis, revealing the lack of a career plan in terms of promotion through merit of years of service. This situation has led to a rotation of teachers within this kind of education network. According to one of the interviewees, there should be more regulation governing the exercising of the profession, given that the control of the municipal and/or state public power is fragile in relation to the functioning of these schools, and there should also be more actions that contribute to the qualification of the practising teachers. This background led SINPRO to come up with a set of actions addressed to those teachers unable to take part in the cultural life of the city. As well as qualification courses, initiatives such as shows, theatre plays and other leisure activities such as recitals, evening parties, debates with plays and shows would serve to bring teachers together and encourage them to socialise with one another — whether or not they belonged to the union — creating ties of identity that transcend the political struggle, but which can contribute, either directly or indirectly, towards the strengthening of these ties.

These communication channels seem to gain relevance in the light of the diversity of working conditions of the teachers of the private network of Rio de Janeiro. This includes institutions ranging from the small schools at the end of the garden — which usually function without being registered, and therefore outside the pertinent legislation — to the catholic schools that supply education to the children of the economic and cultural elite of the city.

When we move on to the words of the SEPE management members, other difficulties arise, such as the lack of professional motivation of the teachers, differentiated career plans⁶, the onset of a set of

illnesses and consequent unprecedented increase in medical leave in Rio de Janeiro⁷.

More than evasion or abandonment of the profession, what one can observe is a “to and fro” of teachers between the education networks (municipal, state and/or private) in the search for better wages and working conditions. According to one SEPE manager “the teachers are not leaving the profession because of lack of vocation, but rather when they realise that the work no longer meets their needs, expectations or interests.” This aspect contradicts studies that point to the slow process of abandonment of the profession which starts with the teachers leaving the classroom⁸. The interviews carried out with the teachers also pointed to the scarcity of material resources, the lack of technical-pedagogical support in the schools, the excessive number of pupils per class and the lack of an incentive for professional betterment. On top of these factors is the growing level of violence in certain places and the lack of security in teaching establishments near drug trafficking areas.

This whole background helps one understand why European and American researchers, among others, have turned their attention to the *proletarianization of the teaching profession*, characterised by the loss of control of the work process, going against the professionalisation as “a condition of preservation and guarantee of a professional status that takes into account the self-regulation, specific competence, income, licence to act, advantages, benefits and independence” (Oliveira, 2004, p. 1138).

Analysis of the data gathered in questionnaires given to fifty-one teachers in five municipal schools located in different regions of the city of Rio de Janeiro with high marks in the *Prova Brasil*⁹ showed that, among the main conflicts faced by the teachers in the management of the class are the lack of respect shown by the pupil and the difficulty in getting the families involved in the schooling of their children (Oliveira, 2004). In other words, the difficulties, in the final analysis, are linked to social transformations such as the growing incorporation of women in the job market, the changes in the models of authority, the new family configurations that place the teacher in a framework of highly complex relations.

If the aforementioned question is typical of the Brazilian reality, research carried out by Dubet

(2002) on the French teaching body confirms this global trend and concludes that it is not only the professional status that defines the role played by the teachers, but increasingly, it is their personal methods and their personality that contribute to delineating the school situation. Even if they are constrained by having to follow bureaucratic rules, teachers define their profession as an individual construction, carried out based on the professional principles and ethics, with special focus on: respecting the programme, concern for their pupils, seeking improved performance and fairness. The management of the classroom is therefore a crucial task, given that the pupils are not all the same and have new sociocultural characteristics, as *subjects of rights* (Tedesco & Fanfani, 2004).

Taking into account the fact that the diversification of the teacher's role is a reality in several countries, Nóvoa (1992, p. 36) suggests that a territory or field of action be defined as a means of control of the profession in accordance with a policy of improving the functioning of the schools. In our case, as we saw earlier, there are a series of conditions required to ensure an effective practice, among which we highlight the institutionalisation of a policy of continuous training, decent wages and support services for the teacher (e.g. like effective pedagogical supervision), combined with the formulation of public policies and commitment by the managers.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Based on what has been pointed out up to here, some issues deserve to be reflected on. The first refers to the effort to bring forth teachers' representations about their profession in their own words aimed at escaping analyses that do not encompass the actual working conditions of the teachers, taking no consideration of the heterogeneity that characterises this professional class.

In admitting that the teachers exercise their profession in institutions and teaching systems that are differentiated depending on the level and jurisdiction, they have very wide-ranging working conditions, as well as receiving distinct training and obtaining a varied range of qualifications, we are led to ask the following: Can one talk about an identity

for the teaching class? Or would it be more prudent to conceive the profession as a field in the sense attributed by Pierre Bourdieu (1976), made up of individuals who occupy unequal positions within the space of the profession? Through this question we want to ask, we want to reflect, also, on the goals that are present both in the media and in the state bureaucracies that either judge the school results as a direct product of the (in)competence of the teachers, or dictate how teachers should act, define training policies and professional certification and ignore their professional insertions, working conditions and ways of carrying out their functions.

As observed by Canário (2001), the professional situations experienced by teachers occur within the framework of collective systems of action (school organisations), whose rules are produced and learned by the social actors themselves. They should be understood not only through individual factors (biographical dimension), but also through organisational and contextual factors. Therefore, the author draws attention to the fact that the teachers learn their profession inside the school, whereby the work context is the space which triggers the professional socialisation process, often spontaneously, and to a lesser extent, in a planned way, i.e. as a time and space of individual and collective reflection set aside in the very organisation of the school work.

A third question is related to the trend — seen worldwide — of draining the collective dimension from the teaching work owing to the new roles that teachers have been asked to play, as pointed out earlier. On this point we agree with Nóvoa (2008, p. 231) when he states that it is important “that an effort is made to promote spaces among peers for exchange and sharing as a way of empowering the principles of the collective and collegiate spirit in the professional culture of the teachers”. This perspective is presented as a strategy for strengthening the autonomy of the teachers deriving from the consequent professional enrichment, in tandem with other actions carried out by the unions. Making it reality also implies the reorganisation of the school work — which involves setting aside the time needed for reflection on the dimensions of the teaching practice and the interchange of ideas — as well as opening up space for recording significant professional experiences in order to preserve the pedagogical heritage produced

in each school, creating conditions to enable the knowledge accumulated through the work of generations of teachers to be socialised, appropriated and

re-contextualised by all those who perform professional roles in common in exercising the teaching profession.

ENDNOTES

1. In recent research 26 articles were published in the three main Brazilian journals in the Education area (according to CAPES), between 2000 and 2006. In this sample one could see a bigger concern about the problem of professional training (70%), rather than the studies that analysed questions related to the career and association experiences (30%) (Xavier, 2008).

2. The Study Groups of Secondary and Preparatory Education Teaching Staff represent the form adopted by the teachers from several areas of Portuguese society who carried out action in 1970/71, fighting for job security, improved professional status and freedom to meet and create associations, among other causes (Ricardo, 2004, p. 133).

3. On this matter see the catalogue of theses and dissertations of the PPGE, UFF and UFRJ, with special attention to the following references: Coelho (1988) Sobreira (1989) and Andrade (2001).

4. While Portuguese political history is marked by the struggle against the authoritarian regime of the New State, which culminated with the 25 April 1974 revolution, in Brazil the fight to bring down the military dictatorship had its peak in 1979, with the Amnesty Law for political prisoners and exiles.

5. The interviews carried out with members of the management of SEPE and SINPRO-Rio were aimed at mapping out the representations about the teaching work, the changes in the social composition of the teaching body, the major challenges and needs of the teachers from the initial years of fundamental teaching onwards. They constitute a cross-section of a broader research project currently being carried out in the PUC-Rio under the title of “Teaching Profession: between the professional status and the exercising of the profession”, under the coordination of Isabel Lélis (2005-2008).

6. As reported by one SEPE leader, there are three kinds of working contracts for the state network teachers. The first is that which establishes a workload of 40 hours a week; the second caters for a weekly workload of 16 hours — twelve in the classroom and four in extra-class activities, and the third proposes a weekly workload of 30 hours. Also noteworthy is the GLT gratification — a gratification for priority allocation — which is attributed to teachers who work in areas of difficult access.

7. Research by FIOCRUZ on the health of teachers in the city and state of Rio de Janeiro states that there is a considerable percentage of teachers from the initial years that leave the profession after 14 years of teaching owing to the burnout syndrome. Cf: Encarte SEPE (21/03/2004).

8. In research on the career of teachers in São Paulo (Br), Lapo and Bueno (2003) ascertain that the “discontent” that precedes the abandonment of the profession is caused by a series of reasons, such as work overload, low wages, competition with other means of information transmission and poor relationships in the workplace. But it also points to aspects that derive from the organisation of the education system itself: the institutional bureaucracy and the control over the teacher’s work, the scarcity of material resources, the lack of technical-pedagogical support and the lack of incentives for professional betterment.

9. As part of the assessment carried out by the *Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Básica — Saeb* [National System of Basic Education Assessment], the *Prova Brasil* is drawn up and implemented by the *Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira — Inep* [Anísio Teixeira National Institute of Educational Studies and Research], a department of the Ministry of Education. It was designed to produce information about education with the aim of helping governors make decisions in terms of educational policies and channelling of technical and financial resources. Cf: www.inep.gov.br/basica/saeb/prova_brasil/ (retrieved april 2008)

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