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CONTINUING TEACHER EDUCATION IN PARANÁ THROUGH STUDY GROUPS: CONFLICTS AND POTENTIALITIES

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Abstract: The aim of this text is to reflect on continuing teacher training, focusing on recurring criticisms in the literature in the area, in order to articulate comments on two models of continuing teacher training in Paraná, both Study Group models, one offered by a federal university and the other by a state government. It highlights the systematic advance of corporate education reformers, with their vision of neoliberal education and the consequences for public policies and the intentions of education: assessment, curriculum, initial training and now, continuing teacher training. This study used a comparative methodology to analyze two groups of studies on teacher training, focusing on objective observation and thematic analysis. The groups were selected on the basis of accessibility and regional relevance. We identified the importance of these initiatives in resisting neoliberal trends in education, highlighting the promotion of critical reflection, valuing teaching experience and dialog as essential pillars. However, challenges such as infantilization, generalization of content and alignment with neoliberal practices, especially in assessment and certification, were recognized. These findings have significant implications for educational practices and policies, suggesting the need for revisions that favor more reflective and critical approaches, respecting teachers' autonomy. It is recommended that future research explore strategies for effectively incorporating teacher experience into continuing education, assess the impact of neoliberal practices on education and investigate educational models that promote active teacher participation and critical dialog.

Keywords: Continuing education, Public policies, Study groups, Neoliberalism, Business reformers.

INTRODUCTION

Continuing teacher education has emerged as a fertile field for educational debate and innovation. In Brazil, and particularly in Paraná, this area has experienced both significant advances and challenges. In this context, this study aims to critically reflect on continuing teacher education, exploring the recurring criticisms in the specialized literature. Authors such as Nóvoa (2019) and Freire (1996) argue that continuing education must transcend the mere transmission of content, promoting a reflective practice that values the teaching experience and the collaborative construction of knowledge. This research looks at two models of continuing education in Paraná, both based on the concept of Study Groups, but differing in the sphere in which they are offered - one linked to a federal university and the other to the state government.

Criticism of continuing education, especially in the model promoted by the government, focuses on the tendency to "infantilize" teachers, a concept pointed out by authors such as Leite (2010), Tardif (2000) and Pimenta (2002). This approach reduces the role of the teacher to a passive receiver of information, limiting the exchange of knowledge and the richness of the teaching experience in the educational process. In addition, the study explores the influences of business reforms and neoliberal education, as discussed by Freitas (2012; 2013; 2016; 2018), Ball (2011) and Apple (2006), on the continuing education scenario. These trends, with their emphasis on evaluation and quantifiable results, have repercussions on public policies and pedagogical intentions.

The proposed analysis uses a bibliographic review methodology that allows a deep dive into the existing literature and a critical comparison between the two models of Study Groups. It is hoped that the results of this study will contribute to a broader understanding of current dynamics in continuing teacher

education, illuminating paths towards more enriching practices and resistance to reductionist tendencies in the educational field.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature specializing in education presents various criticisms of continuing teacher training, in particular the tendency towards the “infantilization” of teachers, a phenomenon widely discussed by César Donizetti Pereira Leite. This infantilization, according to Leite, manifests itself in the oversimplification of content and the reduction of the teaching role to that of a passive receiver of information. Leite (2010) argues that this approach compromises educators’ professional development, underestimating their critical and reflective capacity. Complementing this view, Libâneo (2018) highlights the importance of considering the teaching experience as a vital element in continuing education, proposing a more collaborative and less hierarchical approach to the learning process.

Paulo Freire (1996) presents the concept of dialogic education, which contrasts sharply with traditional teaching approaches. According to Freire, education should not be a process of “depositing” information, where the teacher is the holder of knowledge and the student a passive recipient. Instead, he advocates an educational practice based on dialogue and problematization, where knowledge is built collectively. In continuing education, this approach translates into a model where teachers are not only learners, but also active contributors, bringing their experiences and perspectives to enrich the educational process.

In his writings, Pimenta (2002) defends the idea that continuing education should be a space where this knowledge is shared and discussed, allowing teachers to reflect on their practice, exchange experiences and develop professionally in a more meaningful way.

In the idea of collective construction of knowledge in continuing teacher training, teachers are seen as partners in the educational process, with each bringing unique perspectives based on their classroom experiences. This approach encourages critical reflection and the exchange of ideas, which are fundamental to effective teaching practice. Rather than a series of lectures or one-way courses, continuing education in this model becomes a dynamic forum for learning and professional growth.

Although the dialogic approach to continuing education offers many potentialities, it also faces challenges. One of the main ones is the need to break with the traditional structure of training, often based on hierarchical and transmissive models. In addition, the effective implementation of this approach requires the creation of spaces where teachers feel safe to express their opinions and questions and share their experiences. This also implies a change in the organizational culture of educational institutions, which must value and facilitate the active participation of teachers in their continuing education.

On the other hand, the influence of business reforms and the neoliberal vision on education is a subject of growing concern in academic literature. Authors such as Ball (2011) and Apple (2006) discuss how these reforms, with their emphasis on efficiency and measurable results, have profoundly altered educational policies. In the Brazilian context, this trend is analyzed by authors such as Saviani (2007) and, especially, Freitas (2012; 2013; 2016; 2018), who criticizes the commodification of education and the impact of this approach on pedagogical practices, which radically affect the form and aspects of continuing teacher training.

These neoliberal reforms tend to shape continuing teacher training in terms of specific competencies and skills, often aligned with market needs. Saviani (2007) warns of the risk

of a reductionist view of education, where teacher training becomes instrumental and detached from a critical understanding of educational practice. The emphasis on assessment and standardized curriculum, as discussed by Arroyo (2013), can lead to a homogenization of education, limiting teacher autonomy and the diversity of pedagogical approaches.

This critical overview of continuing teacher training reveals the complexity and challenges faced in the field of education. Reflection on these issues is fundamental to understanding current dynamics and seeking paths that value teachers' experience and reflective capacity, resisting reductionist and market-driven trends in education.

Under the neoliberal model, teacher training tends to focus on technical skills and measurable results, rather than developing critical and reflective thinking. There is increasing pressure for teachers to conform to set standards and targets, often ignoring the specific needs of their students and local contexts. Authors such as Saviani (2007) highlight how this approach can limit teachers' ability to act as transformative agents in education.

Corporate reforms in education introduce corporate management practices in schools, such as performance evaluation based on standardized tests and results-based management. This approach can lead to excessive standardization of teaching, as pointed out by Nóvoa (2019), who questions the effectiveness of these measures in improving educational quality.

Teachers' pedagogical autonomy is often restricted by business reforms. These reforms tend to impose a centralized curriculum and standardized teaching methods, limiting teachers' freedom to adapt content to the needs of their students, as discussed by Biesta (2015), who emphasizes the importance of teacher autonomy in responding to complex and varied educational demands.

Public education policies, influenced by neoliberalism, often prioritize performance on standardized tests and preparation for the job market.

This can result in a narrowing of the curriculum, with less emphasis on areas such as arts, humanities and civic education, as pointed out by authors such as Nussbaum (2010), who criticizes this trend for neglecting the development of critical and empathetic skills in students.

Study groups, in essence, are collectives focused on collaborative learning and knowledge sharing. They provide an environment where teachers can discuss pedagogical practices, educational theories, and challenges encountered in their professional experiences.

These groups distinguish themselves by promoting participatory learning, in contrast to more traditional continuing education methods which can be more directive and less interactive. Collaborative learning in study groups encourages debate, critical reflection and the exchange of experiences, in line with the ideas of progressive educators such as Paulo Freire, who emphasize the importance of dialogue and active participation in the educational process.

In the context of continuing education, study groups offer teachers the opportunity to update themselves on new pedagogical approaches and educational innovations, as well as sharing challenges and solutions encountered in teaching practice. They function as forums for continuous professional development, where teachers are not just passive recipients of information, but active participants in the process of building knowledge.

The effectiveness of study groups in continuing teacher education depends on several factors, such as the structure of the group, the relevance of the content discussed, the active participation of members and institutional support. These groups can be especially valuable

in contexts where professional development is seen as an ongoing process integrated into teaching practice, rather than an isolated or one-off activity.

Continuing education is provided via study groups that take place in a virtual environment, with synchronous meetings via *google meet*, and thus manage to reach different professionals, mainly in the state of Paraná, due to its proximity to the Federal University, but also linked to the continuing education program for teachers in the state of Paraná, via the Paraná State Department of Education (SEED-PR) for its employees.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study, inspired by the guidelines of authors such as Stake (1995) and Merriam (2009), adopts a comparative approach to examine two models of Study Groups in continuing teacher education. In line with Stake (1995), who emphasizes the importance of understanding educational experiences in specific contexts, this study seeks to evaluate how each model promotes the provision and attempts to promote the active participation of teachers in continuing education.

In describing my role as an observer in this research, I adopt an approach that reflects the guidelines of research methodology authors such as Yin (2014) and Creswell (2014). Impartiality and analytical distance are fundamental to guaranteeing the objectivity and reliability of the data collected. Following the principles established by these authors, the researcher's role is to observe and document the interactions and practices in the Study Groups without influencing or actively participating.

The criteria adopted for selecting Study Groups include fundamental aspects to guarantee the relevance and impact of the research. Firstly, it is essential that the researcher has access to the training offered, so it must be an accessible group for contact and entry.

In addition, these trainings must be available to public school teachers in the state of Paraná, ensuring that the results are relevant to the regional context. Other criteria include the existence of clear parameters for maintaining links and certifying participation in the groups, as well as the involvement of researchers and teachers in different training courses and themes. These criteria ensure a comprehensive and representative approach to teacher training practices.

The material used in the comparative analysis consists of recordings made by the person in charge of each meeting of the Study Groups, made available to the participants after the sessions. These recordings were made with explicit consent, obtained at the beginning of each session, following the standard procedure for recordings in training environments via *Google Meet*. In addition to analyzing the video of the meeting, the researcher observed the meetings selected for this analysis, always in the light of the theoretical framework mobilized in this investigation.

In this research, participation in dynamic activities and the resulting discussions will be compared between the groups. In order to quantitatively assess these aspects, Transkrip-tor software was used to transcribe the recordings, which facilitated the precise identification and quantification of the participants' interventions. After this analysis, a comparative analysis was made between the models in this respect, in relation to the theoretical frameworks mobilized.

In the methodology proposed for this study, the analysis focused on the data collected from the Study Groups using mainly Thematic Analysis (Braun; Clarke, 2006), and Cross-Comparison (Yin, 2014). This method will provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics and effectiveness of each approach in offering and actively involving teachers.

The main limitation of this study lies in the infrequency of observations and the limited variety of training courses analyzed (two 180-minute meetings of the federal university study group and four 90-minute meetings of the state study group). This methodological choice was based on the thematic proximity between the meetings observed, providing a focused and coherent analysis. However, we recognize the need to broaden the scope in future investigations, including a more diverse range of data collection materials, in order to enrich the understanding of the dynamics present in different training contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Initially, the methodology used in the research comprises an introduction to the two study groups, highlighting the use of the Google Meet platform to hold classes and virtual meetings with various participants. Subsequently, the analysis of the data collected is discussed.

In the context of the Public Policy Observatory Research Group (GPOPP), its genesis dates back to 2013, with the purpose of bringing together academics and researchers interested in exploring the processes of formulation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and impacts of public policies in the national territory, with an emphasis on the regional and local effects of these policies. The group is distinguished by its adaptability, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that began on March 20, 2020, in accordance with Legislative Decree no. 6 of 2020, adopting synchronous meetings mediated by technology. The group's flexibility is reflected in the incorporation of professors for continuous professional development, covering various areas of research.

1. The program appoints the trainer as the teacher responsible for the meeting and the sequence in which the topics are presented. This first author was the professional selected via a selection process, available on the official website. The program names the participants in the training as "course-takers". The word is a bit frightening, as a course-taker refers to someone who takes a course and is not necessarily aligned with active training positions or those that escape Freire's (1996) criticism of banking training.

GPOPP's distinctive method is based on the prior distribution of reading materials, in line with the concept of the "inverted classroom", as cited by Bergmann and Sams (2016). This method anticipates the participants' preparation for the monthly meetings, promoting a more active learning experience, although it requires a greater investment of time in prior preparation.

In contrast, the "Trainers in Action" program, a continuing education initiative launched in 2020 in the state of Paraná, evolved from four to 68 themes by 2023. Aimed at teachers in the state network, the program focuses on professional promotion and certification, and is especially relevant for the career progression of teachers who have been promoted. The in-service training format provides a platform for exchanging experiences and learning between educators, with a teacher acting as a trainer¹ and conducting the meetings based on a structure of content and reflective activities.

A comparison between the models reveals that both the state and federal models seek to encourage the active participation of course participants, moving away from the traditional model of education. However, they differ significantly in their methodological approaches. While "Formadores em Ação" emphasizes synchronous meeting time for the dissemination of material and discussion, GPOPP adopts a more differentiated approach, with prior reading and discussion during synchronous meetings, stressing the need for preparation outside the meeting.

This methodological difference is evident in the structure of the meetings. In Paraná, the training is divided into phases of presentation of objectives, practical activities and sharing of results, with an emphasis on the practical

phase. In contrast, GPOPP uses an inverted classroom approach, balancing the presentation of content and open debates, providing a more dynamic and contextualized learning environment, reflecting current events and the realities of the participating teachers.

In order to assess how the GPOPP and “Formadores em Ação” groups would resist a critique from Freitas about the advance of education businessmen and neoliberalism in education, it is first necessary to understand the essence of Freitas’ critique. Luiz Carlos de Freitas argues that neoliberalism in education is characterized by commodification, privatization and competitiveness, emphasizing results-based management and the reduction of the state’s role in public education.

In the case of GPOPP, it is a research group focused on analyzing public policies. The way it resists, as a collective, could be found in its critical and academic approach. By investigating public policies, the group examines the effects of neoliberalism on education and its implications. Its methodology, which encourages critical reading and debate, seems aligned with a more traditional educational perspective and less influenced by business interests, focusing on the intellectual and critical development of the participants.

On the other hand, the “Formadores em Ação” program, as a continuing education initiative for state school teachers, can be interpreted in two ways in relation to Freitas’ criticism. On the one hand, the program could be seen as a response to the demand for continuous professional development in a context of limited resources, which may be consistent with the neoliberal logic of resource optimization. On the other hand, the program can also be seen as an effort to value teachers’ professional development and promote pedagogical innovation within the public system, which would be a resistance to the neoliberal tendencies towards the commodification and privatization of education.

In short, the resistance of these groups to Freitas’ critique would depend on how their practices and philosophies align with or oppose the principles of neoliberalism in education. While GPOPP, with its critical and academic approach, is more clearly resistant to neoliberal tendencies, “Formadores em Ação” can present a more complex and nuanced resistance, depending on the interpretation of its practices and objectives in the broader context of Brazilian educational policy.

The ideal continuing education program is one that respects and values teachers’ experience and autonomy (Freire, 1996; Pimenta, 2002). It should promote a collaborative learning environment where educators are encouraged to reflect critically on their practices, share experiences and build knowledge collectively. This ideal model is in line with the theories of Paulo Freire and other educators who emphasize the importance of dialogue, problematization and the active participation of teachers in the learning process, thus avoiding the infantilization of continuing teacher training.

Study groups like GPOPP play an essential role in resisting neoliberal influences in education, promoting a critical analysis of public policies and educational practices, challenging marketization and standardization in the sector. These groups offer alternative environments for professional development, prioritizing research, critical debate and collaboration, as opposed to the reductionist and technical approaches often driven by neoliberalism. However, they face challenges in communicating with the community, limiting their expansion and popularization.

The “Trainers in Action” program, on the other hand, has been widely communicated and has had a direct impact on the professional development of teachers in Paraná, attracting great interest thanks to its thematic expansion. However, it faces challenges in generalizing the content and creating spaces that combat the infantilization of teachers,

often offering methods and strategies already known by the participants, which can make the meetings tedious and reduce engagement.

Another crucial aspect for both groups is the issue of certification and assessment criteria. Both require a minimum attendance at activities, but only “Trainers in Action” requires additional assessments, such as records of activities and practical implementations. This approach, although aimed at the practical application of knowledge, can inadvertently align itself with neoliberal logics by emphasizing quantifiable results and rigid deadlines.

Finally, the frequency of the programs - quarterly for “Trainers in Action” and biannually or annually for GPOPP - brings additional challenges. Quarterly training allows for greater teacher turnover, but can be exhausting due to the intense evaluation criteria. GPOPP’s annual format, on the other hand, ties certification to long-term commitments, which can lead to exhaustion at the end of the year.

The future of continuing education in Paraná looks promising, especially if existing programs continue to evolve and adapt to the needs of educators. The key to future success will be the incorporation of pedagogical approaches that promote teacher autonomy, critical dialog and continuous reflection on teaching practice. In addition, it is crucial that these programs resist the influence of corporate and neoliberal practices, maintaining a focus on the holistic and critical development of teachers.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The main findings of the discussion highlight the importance of study groups like GPOPP and programs like “Formadores em Ação” in resisting neoliberal trends in education, emphasizing critical reflection, valuing the teaching experience, and dialogue as the foundations of ideal continuing education. However, both face challenges related to infantilization, generalization of content, and alignment with neoliberal practices, especially in terms of evaluation and certification.

These observations suggest the need to review educational practices and policies in order to promote more reflective, critical and less hierarchical continuing education. It is essential that continuing education initiatives resist the commodification and standardization of education, valuing teachers’ autonomy and experience.

Future research should explore ways of incorporating teaching experience more effectively into continuing education, as well as assessing the impact of neoliberal practices on education. In addition, it is recommended to implement educational models that favor active teacher participation, critical dialogue and the collective construction of knowledge. It is also essential to investigate strategies to mitigate teacher burnout and improve the effectiveness of continuing education.

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