

Analysing projects of professionalizing education - the challenge of quality

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This work intends to describe the theoretical-conceptual *design* of an investigation whose main aim is to analyse and interpret an ongoing process of reconstruction of a teacher education curricular project (1st to the 4th grade teaching) as well as its bases. We use several theoretical frameworks that form three dimensions of analysis: curricular, organisational and personal / interpersonal. We are seeking to identify points and levels of intersection of these analysis dimensions, in search of a "pluralist" synthesis of several theoretical frameworks, that will provide conceptual consistency to the interpretations of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

" The key words are meaning, coherence, connectedness, synergy, alignment, and capacity for continuous improvement. Paradoxically, if meaning is easy to come by, it is less likely to be powerful.[...]Our task is to realize that finding meaning in complex systems is as difficult as it is rewarding." (Fullan, 2001, p. 19)

We would like to begin with an idea which, in a certain way, was a starting point for our work. Thomas Sergiovanni (2000) claimed that "*Change itself is in need of change*" (p.57). Sergiovanni explains that to fulfil its goals, educational change (both as a discipline and as a practice), must evolve from a science concerned with instrumentalities, to a science and art of design concerned with substance.

Perhaps somewhat simplistically, we conceptualize the substance of change as being **what actors involved in a change process think, feel and do, both individually and as a group.**

We are convinced that if we should be able to analyse the substance of change, we can clarify and understand the process. In so doing (and clearly within a systemic point of view), eventually we reach understanding of the system, from the micro elements which exert influence upon it and are influenced by it.

We also believe that speaking about quality assurance and quality management in education, means penetrating in these change mechanisms, both at the educational systems level, and at schools and individuals level (individuals here meaning: teachers and their teaching profession, as well as students and their "learning profession"). In our view, this applies to all levels of education, including higher education.

These are the basic epistemological principles which constitute the general framework of our project.

Our work consists of a case-study whose main aim is to analyse and interpret an ongoing process of reconstruction of a teacher education curricular project (1st to the 4th grade teaching) as well as its bases. The 'new' philosophy of the course under study intended to place the professional practice at the centre of the educational process.

The specificities of Higher education with a professionalizing character have been under investigation for only a short time. One of its main challenges is the need to ensure that new graduates have the required competences for their professional performance, of which perhaps the most important competence is to incorporate in their practice a dimension of permanent reconstruction of the knowledge that characterises the teaching profession. This aim, however, assumes that the educational process itself and the trainees and trainers who engage in it, individually and collectively, appropriate it, while developing competences of the same nature.

It seems therefore important to analyse, besides the curricular project itself, the principles underlying it, and the ways it is implemented, assessed and reconstructed. Our aim is to answer the following fundamental questions:

- How is the change process viewed by its actors?
- Which reflection fields emerge?

Do teacher educators eventually problematize their scientific knowledge, their professional practice, their institutional membership, their concepts about teaching and learning?

- In which moments and contexts do these reflection areas emerge?
- How do they manifest themselves, or why don't they?
- How do they evolve? Which factors regulate them?
- How do they relate to the Organisational Culture?
- What influence do they exert on the 'final' product (the curricular project's conception and implementation)?

These questions bring us to the core of "*Dynamic complexity* [which] *is the real territory of change*" (Senge, 1990, quoted by Fullan, 1993, p.20). This is, in our view, the fundamental *locus* of quality.

In order to capture the complexity of the field we are looking at, we try to synthesize and offer conceptual consistency to three different theoretical frameworks, which give way to 3 analysis dimensions we decided to adopt: The curricular dimension, the organizational dimension and the personal / interpersonal dimension.

The curricular dimension:

This concerns analysing the curricular formulation of the education, that is, the definition of its finalities and ways of implementation and assessment.

Some of the emerging questions (possible reflection fields for teacher educators):

What is it, that is most essential that students learn, if they are to become teachers?

What is the role of specific knowledge areas?

What is the role of practice?

What is our part, as teacher educators, in those decisions?

While professional education requires "(...)production and not only consumption of knowledge(...)" (Núñez, 1988, quoted by Canário, 1999, p.21), the organisation of forms of pedagogical work can no longer focus on atomistically defined objectives. So it becomes necessary to identify competences that integrate the contribution of several scientific disciplines and perform an in-depth analysis of the ways to potentiate the mobilisation of these different types of knowledge whenever they should be necessary, as well as the capacity of constructing professional knowledge on the basis of practice.

This reconceptualisation of the relation between theory and practice raises issues regarding the educators' curricular practices (and these are known to be important, as far as the quality of the students' educational process is concerned). *"The 'professional quality' of a teacher education project is related to the way teacher educators make a connection between the content of their particular disciplines and the teaching practice."* (García, 1999, p.107). The influence of teachers' curricular decisions and professional competencies on the students' learning quality is also stressed in a particularly eloquent way by John Biggs (1999).

The nature of the teaching profession itself (both from the students' point of view, and from the teacher educators' point of view) is the core element in the conception of the curricular 'architecture' and dynamics. Understanding the teacher educators' part in that process seems vital, if we want to see, beyond the "manifest" curriculum, the "hidden" one.

The organisational dimension:

We take here this expression in the double sense of:

- Facing school as a Social institution, responding to large-scale socio-political movements (like national-wide educational reforms, for instance)
- Facing school as a Community (Organization) which suffers internal, "tectonic" change movements.

There is an organizational culture, memory and identity which evolve over time, always in search of the ideal balance between "vital worlds" and "systemic world"(Sergiovanni, 2000).

The determinant influence of the organisational variables on schools' qualitative change has been stressed by several authors (Bolívar, 1997; Fullan, 2000; Hargreaves, 1998; Hopkins, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2000, and in Portugal Alarcão, 2000; Barroso, 1997; Fernandes, 2000; Roldão, 2000; Sanches, 1998, among others). But, as we stated before, it is not by simply identifying these variables that we reach the understanding of the change process. We seek to identify interrelationships operating on the spot, and in our view, only perceptible through a contextualized observation of what is going on. Referring to the success of human organizations, Stacey (1992, quoted by Fullan, 1993, p. 20) writes: "(...) *success has to be the discovery of patterns that emerge through actions we take in response to the changing agendas of issues we identify.*"

Therefore, it is important to analyse (and these would be some of our questions) to what extent the school assumes itself as a "learning organisation" and how it perceives and manages the change processes it suffers.

The personal / interpersonal dimension:

In this dimension we take as unit of analysis, not the individual (more or less influenced by social factors), but the individual-in-interaction-with-others. We place ourselves in the view of an historical-cultural approach to education, within Psychology's theoretical-conceptual framework, namely the psychosociological theory of interaction, as it has been recently conceptualised by Perret Clermont & Nicolet (1988), Perret Clermont (1995, 1999), Carugati et al (1997), Grossen (2001) and César (1998, 2000), among others.

Wertsch's concept of Intersubjectivity (1985) is central in our analysis: in every interaction there is a place for meaning negotiations; there are also non explicit issues which come with context. The way subjects perceive one another and the context in which they interact plays an important role in their dialogue and in every common products they come to construct. Also Grossen's concept of Knowledge Subjectivation (Grossen, 2001; Grossen et al, 1997) refers to acquiring and using knowledge as socially constructed phenomena, and it also underlines the fact that contexts induce certain ways of thinking and acting.

In a project of education, the most direct actors involved occupy a fundamental place. In our opinion, it is important to identify and understand (again these would be some of our questions) the different ways in which teacher educators perceive and engage in the educational process, both individually and collectively, how their engagement allows new construction or formulations of the educational process to emerge; and how they appropriate this knowledge.

We seek to understand epistemic subjects within certain contexts (a practice community) as well as the

influence of contexts in interactions. (What kind of contexts exert influence upon what kind of interactions ? What is the nature of that influence?).

In this work we presuppose that quality is a context-bounded concept. Far beyond (sometimes in spite of) 'top-down' guidelines or legal frameworks, no matter how good they may be, the quality of education is heavily decided in teachers' everyday work, because that is what really matters most, as far as students' learning is concerned.

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