PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATION DURING THE PANDEMIC: NARRATIVES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN PORTUGAL

DESENVOLVIMENTO PROFISSIONAL E COMUNICAÇÃO DURANTE A PANDEMIA: NARRATIVA DE PROFESSORES DA EDUCAÇÃO BÁSICA EM PORTUGAL

DESEARROLLO PROFESIONAL Y COMUNICACIÓN DURANTE LA PANDEMIA: NARRATIVA DEL PROFESORADO DE ENSEÑANZA BÁSICA EN PORTUGAL

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ABSTRACT: This article brings together the results of a broader international research project, All Within⁵, being carried out at CIEP|UÉ. This article focuses on one of its objectives - to understand the processes of training and professional development of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, taking into account the lived experience of this event and the role that the various actors assumed during the internship, in a supervision process where shared writing was central. The section presented here includes the analysis and interpretation of narratives written during the lockdown periods of 2020 and 2021, by elementary school teachers in Portugal, cooperating in the initial training of educators and primary school teachers, while hosting interns from the University of Évora. Based on the results of the research carried out, we focus in this text on the importance given to communication processes during the internship, the supervision process and the role of technology in the learning and professional development of these teachers, during training in a work context, with ample uncertainty and disruptive experiences in the lives of people and schools.


RESUMO: O presente texto traz resultados de um projeto de investigação internacional mais amplo, All Within, em desenvolvimento no CIEP|UÉ. Este artigo foca-se num dos seus objetivos - compreender processos de formação e desenvolvimento profissional de docentes, durante a pandemia COVID-19, tendo em atenção a experiência vivida desse acontecimento e o papel que os diversos intervenientes assumiram durante o estágio, num processo de supervisão onde a escrita partilhada foi central. O recorte aqui apresentado traz a análise e interpretação de narrativas escritas durante períodos de confinamento de 2020 e 2021, por professores do 1º Ciclo do Ensino Básico em Portugal e cooperantes na formação inicial de educadores, enquanto acolhiam estagiárias da Universidade de Évora. Com base nos resultados da pesquisa realizada, focou-se no relevo atribuído aos processos comunicacionais durante o estágio, ao processo de supervisão e o papel da tecnologia nas aprendizagens e desenvolvimento profissional dessas professoras, durante uma formação em contexto de trabalho, com ampla incerteza e vivências disruptivas na vida das pessoas e das escolas.


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⁵ This international project, named "All Within - Perceptions of Different Educational Actors on the Importance of Participation in Teacher Training (All Within, our translation)," is underpinned by the recognition of the importance of participation in learning processes (CROWLEY, LARKINS, PINTO, 2020; GARCÍA-PÉREZ, 2000; MARTIN-BERMÚDEZ, MORENO-FERNANDEZ, 2021). Its main objectives are as follows: To understand the influence of social, school, and academic actors' participation in the training and professional development of teachers, capturing their perspectives; To identify formative needs that promote successful professional processes, especially those involving various transitions for children and young people, in the school environment; To understand how social, school, and academic actors perceive the learning processes and what relationships they establish with community well-being. This article focuses solely on the first objectives that drive the ongoing research.
**RESUMEN**: Este texto trae los resultados de un proyecto de investigación internacional más amplio, All Within, en desarrollo en el CIEP|UÉ. Este artículo se centra en uno de sus objetivos: comprender los procesos de capacitación y desarrollo profesional de los docentes durante la pandemia de COVID-19, teniendo en cuenta la experiencia vivida de este evento y el papel que los diversos actores asumieron durante la pasantía, en un proceso de supervisión donde la escritura compartida fue central. El extracto presentado aquí trae el análisis y la interpretación de las narrativas escritas durante los periodos de confinamiento de 2020 y 2021, por profesores del 1er Ciclo de Educación Básica en Portugal y cooperando en la formación inicial de educadores, mientras dan la bienvenida a pasantes de la Universidad de Évora. A partir de los resultados de la investigación realizada enfocamos en este texto el énfasis atribuido a los procesos de comunicación durante la pasantía, el proceso de supervisión y el papel de la tecnología en el aprendizaje y desarrollo profesional de estos docentes, durante una formación en un contexto laboral, con amplia incertidumbre y experiencias disruptivas en la vida de las personas y las escuelas.

will tell, as, just like the virus, capitalism also transforms and adapts, finding alternative ways and maintaining the status quo.

We acknowledge that working in a state of permanent uncertainty generates resistance, albeit seemingly invisible (MARÍN-SUELVES; PARDO-BALDOVI; SAN MARTÍN-ALONSO, 2021). In the educational context, the solution to suspending in-person classes shifted to using technology and Distance Education (DE), a plausible explanation with pros and cons. This article emerges from the pandemic process and its interference in shaping reflections based on inquiries within an international team. Initially, we pondered what had transpired in schools regarding education, how the relationship between teachers and students had been during virtual instruction, whether teachers were prepared for this change, how they dealt with the imposed solutions, and how those who were preparing for a future full of uncertainties perceive and assimilate such circumstances?

Questions like these arise from the analysis of action proposals in all areas (University of Évora, states, municipalities, private initiatives), but above all, from the experiences we had, both in teaching and in supporting teachers with whom we had employment ties in schools or cooperation agreements in teacher education.

**Distance Education in Portugal during the pandemic**

The impossibility for any student, at all educational levels, to be present in school environments became a reality. Thus, technological resources gained importance due to the lack of training in Distance Education (DE) among teachers and the imposition by the State. Although Portugal had legal support for implementing DE, its use for students in the first cycle of Basic Education was not anticipated. In a predominantly centralized education system, as in Portugal, decisions in March 2020 were immediately extended to all levels of education corresponding to compulsory schooling.

A comprehensive national program called #Estudoemcasa# (#StudyAtHome#) was launched in early April. This program was designed to cater to students who did not have the ease or capability to access the Internet and the educational resources provided by teachers. Broadcasting through a television channel was implemented to ensure that all students with access to a television enjoyed equal learning opportunities.

In this context, it is essential to highlight that the focus on subject matter content received as much emphasis as neglecting the importance of relationships and interactions in the
school environment. Once again, we observed the prevalence of a top-down process imposed by the Ministry of Education of Portugal. It is crucial to consider "the gaps that exist between the teacher and their teaching, between learning and teaching, between the idea that teachers have of their students and what their students are, or between what teachers teach and what teachers learn" (LEAL DA COSTA; SARMENTO, 2018, p. 63, our translation).

Addressing issues related to teacher training implies recognizing that it is essential in all areas of the curriculum, not limited solely to the teaching of computer science or computing (DÍAS-LÓPES; MANQUILÓN-SÁNCHEZ; MIRETE-RUIZ, 2020; RAMOS; ESPADEIRO, 2014).

Although this model was adopted during the pandemic to maintain the continuity of school activities and mitigate the effects of social isolation, it did not fail to present challenges. Simultaneously, it generated innovations worthy of dissemination. This approach was conceived within a short timeframe, which allowed for the approval of a series of measures but also resulted in the impossibility of establishing a universal policy for the country to deal with the complexity of the situation and the inadequate teacher training, which added to the ongoing context of social distancing.

Thus, we observe that government structures' response to the pandemic was marked by simplification and swiftness, factors exacerbated by limited knowledge about the virus and its effects. This response was centralized, aiming to encompass the entire country. As we have emphasized in previous works, even in different circumstances, performativity prevailed, meaning "control over who the students are, what they should learn, or how they should behave" (LEAL DA COSTA; SARMENTO, 2018, p. 75, our translation).

Even without a physical presence in schools and universities, we monitored cooperating teachers' work in supervising practices in initial professor education. The work with students was not interrupted, nor was the training process, despite the disruptive circumstances we experienced. To investigate this process, we relied on the experience of practice supervision at the University of Évora, in which the coordinating teacher, collaborating professor, and field teacher planned actions, established procedures, and found solutions that enabled the continuity of work with students through technology.
Methodology

We understand that biographical history simultaneously constitutes a tool for both education and research, as it allows "the person, in narrating, to narrate oneself, and in doing so, to reframe experiences, learnings, giving them new meaning" (FRISON; SIMÃO, 2011, p. 198, our translation). Biographical research can be conducted through various instruments, such as memories, narratives, oral histories, life stories, and biographies, among others, and can utilize a wide range of sources, including films, diaries, letters, and documents, including those that circulate through Digital Technology, thus enabling the reconstruction of a narrative (SANZ HERNÁNDEZ, 2005).

For over a decade, the work we have been conducting, with biographical explorations guided by learning and professional development, both in the research context and in teacher education, especially during periods of pedagogical supervision, has led us to recognize narrative as an anthropological phenomenon, a research method, and a formative practice. Therefore, we have made a significant contribution, especially in understanding ourselves as a privileged and disruptive soul expressing participants' emancipation and autonomy and as researchers who act as subjects or learners in training processes. We acknowledge that works involving narratives point to contemporary research trends, indicating forms of work, listening, and learning that seek answers to specific questions and the possible construction of a theory about the person in the process of formation (ABRAHÃO, 2012; NÓVOA, 2004).

Participants

This report was prepared based on interactions between the researcher and supervisor in real-world contexts (C.L.C.) and a primary school teacher in Portugal (S.M.). The teacher committed to providing all information recorded in the successive email exchanges between the participants involved in supervision. This collaboration significantly contributed to our research over the period of implementing Distance Education, spanning the years 2020 and 2021.

In essence, the supervision of pedagogical practices was complemented by attentive and sensitive listening (LEAL DA COSTA; PASSEGGI; ROCHA, 2020). Understanding an experience built within our profession allowed us to develop a biographical research approach incorporating the collaborative learning experience of everyone involved. Thus, we drew on the perspectives of teachers who reflected on their experiences and learning during this period,
maintaining systematic records during the email supervision due to the emergency. This allowed us to create a comprehensive and interpretive framework for the stories.

**Procedure**

Being present and close was crucial during the initial confinement phase to continue future teachers' training work in March 2020. The internship began in February and involved eight students from the 3rd year of the Bachelor's degree in Basic Education at the University of Évora, with an equivalent number of collaborating teachers, groups of primary school students, and their families.

During the observation period in March, a cooperative intervention was implemented, which involved planned pedagogical practices and systematic reflections conducted weekly. Students maintained relationships with collaborating teachers, and the purpose of these collaborative activities was to enable a week of intervention in which collaboration was accompanied by the design and implementation of activities with students in their school environment.

**Results**

In the absence of teachers and students in schools, students faced the threat of disrupting their course and the impossibility of experiencing pedagogical practice in a school context. The University took the initiative to overcome these contingencies and seek alternatives to avoid a broader disruption of the training process that, initiated in February, was supposed to culminate in an entire semester. Among the contents of the email sent by the University supervisor, we highlight the following:

> [...] As a faculty member and collaborating teacher at the University of Évora, I know that managing and developing the curriculum with rapid adaptations to current circumstances has not been easy. [...] I request your availability so that the students can continue collaborating with you while also taking responsibility for some dynamics of organization and curriculum development that have already begun [...] Therefore, we believe staying in touch with you and the children is necessary. One possibility could be the creation of a composition that records the most significant aspects of our daily lives [...] We, the students, will all contribute. Therefore, the students have asked or may have already requested these everyday stories. We are looking for stories/texts/narratives, primarily from younger children, whom we ask to have family members record a few sentences, two or three, no more, per day. They should freely use the type of text, format, or size. If accompanied by
All collaborating teachers responded affirmatively, enabling the continuation of the process that had been initiated with the students. In this article, we will establish a closer relationship with one of the teachers, referred to as SM, which will help us elucidate the learning and professional development processes during the pandemic. Below, we share SM's response:

Thank you for the email you sent and for your kind words in this process, in which they requested changes and with so few resources. In short, we are here to face this challenge in the best possible way. I have been saying for many years that our first-cycle schools should have more computer equipment in the classrooms, and now that it is necessary, we do not have it. But we will do everything possible to continue the classrooms with the existing resources (SM, May 5, 2020, our translation).

In this way, before delving into the perspective of a first-cycle Basic Education (1st CEB) teacher who collaborated in our initial teacher education pedagogical practice, we acknowledge the power of narrative, not only as the outcome of a "telling act", but as something that "also has the power to make what is narrated effective" (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2016, p. 141, our translation). Below, we share the conversation with the university supervisor, which, in our interpretation, demonstrates that we are approaching a collaborative supervision process in which interactions have significant consequences:

Students continue to be encouraged by the prospect of a different experience that allows them to advance in their academic development. Free texts are also fascinating, and you could plan a remote intervention, if SM agrees, by requesting that they illustrate and describe the reason for that moment and photographically document exciting events of the same day, not necessarily related to the topic they wrote about. When this circumstance changes, we can tell stories from these moments and use the records to enrich the experience. We can identify changed behavior patterns and aspects we wish to alter. "[...] There will be no lack of imagination and meaningful opportunities for content/programs and the children [...]" (CLC, April 5, 2020, our translation).

Discussing the interactions and their practical value may seem unusual, but the importance of continuous communication and meaning-making is highlighted for challenging experiences and promoting innovation. Despite the physical distance we maintained during the lockdown, a period experienced simultaneously with the students' pedagogical practice, it required decisions to be made after negotiation with all those involved. The teacher's response evidences this:
Through successive remote meetings facilitated by technology, the opportunity arose to accompany collaborating teachers in their adaptation to Distance Education, supported by the #Estudoemcasa# (#StudyAtHome#) Program. This program allowed us to maintain relationships where oral communication was valuable, along with written communication via email, which proved necessary, and reflective writing that adjusted to the requirements of the in-person model, as discussed by Folque, Leal-Da-Costa, Artur (2016) or Leal da Costa (2018).

Biographical mediation emerged as a possibility from the perspective of micro-social relations (FERRAROTTI, 1983) that persisted despite all the challenges imposed. It manifested in social interactions' expectations, beliefs, and values during this period. We also observed that storytelling and reflecting on human life was a constant need that naturally emerged from pursuing learning and transformation, even amidst uncertainty. The words of the teacher allow us to understand the antropoformativo paradigm discussed by Pineau (2006) or Passeggi (2008):

*Dr. CLC, thank you for your kind words, as this process of changing teaching methodologies and strategies, so unexpected and sudden, without training and with so few resources, has demanded so much from all of us. Your last email was like "believe and feel" that all the effort made was valued. I thank you again for all your availability to accompany this process and the intervention proposals (SM, May 31, 2020, our translation).*

Through the analysis of the exchanged emails and written conversations, we can discern how we construct multiple and diverse "narratives" in different contexts and places to make sense of what happens to us. Similarly, we build these narratives with and for them (PASSEGGI, 2016, p. 305). These considerations presuppose our belief in the value of language as a structuring element of thought (VYGOTSKY, 1991), which enables us to understand the learning process within the profession and supervision. Furthermore, we introduce the idea that learning does not occur exclusively within the individual but depends on communication, interaction with others, and relationships with the social context.

Biographical learning is also grounded in perspectives that can be analyzed as learning environments (LAVE; WENGER, 1991). This is illustrated by the words of the teacher referring to the teacher training model we seek to promote, an approach that proves particularly relevant in such disruptive contexts:
The director of the School Association issued this "appeal":

_In this context, it is impossible to plant, manage the land, school gardens, or visit farms... Students must do other activities (drawings, comics, texts, stories, videos... put their imagination to work). [...]_ As the Escrita Criativa (Creative Writing) Project is already being developed and C informed me that the group is almost done, it does not prevent Professor C from providing support or intervention in parallel. [...] I already have the planning proposal for Tuesday, in case you want to propose changes or continue from Wednesday onwards (SM, May 31, 2020, our translation).

We also observe in your words an approach that considers (professional) learning as a culturally mediated, historically developed activity that emerges from practice (ENGESTRÖM, 2001). In this context, learning is conceived as a process of personal and social transformation, emphasizing the self and hetero-formative dimension of narrative and incorporating these dimensions into teacher training. Furthermore, biographical learning can be related, to some extent, to historical-cultural matrix perspectives found in the curriculum design of the master's program that houses the training of the students that this collaborator accompanied, along with the university professor responsible.

The start of the project's work represented a significant challenge that required a reconfiguration in the approach to work carried out remotely and with children in confinement. This also entailed an intense exchange of communications between the collaborating teacher, the student teacher, and the University of Évora supervisor. This communication exchange included the presentation of the adopted approaches, the necessary adaptations due to the conditions imposed by the pandemic, the procedures implemented with the children, the dialogue established with families, and the dialogue among the teachers themselves.

In the pursuit of understanding, in this context filled with complexity, authors such as Delory-Momberger (2016) and Alheit and Dausien (2004, 2006) contribute to the definition of biography and its importance in justifying actions and choices along the journey. These authors question the ability to narrate life biography, understanding it as a mental and cognitive activity in which the human being narratively organizes their lived experience. In the words of Alheit (2009, p. 138, our translation) "lifelong learning instrumentalizes and emancipates at the same time," offering a specific view of biographical learning that allows us to understand lifelong learning, incorporating the transformative contributions of others and the contexts that can be part of a biographical process.

Narrative can demonstrate that "in the process of biography, the person narrating, although unable to change the events, can reinterpret them within a new entanglement,
reinventing themselves with it" (PASSEGGI; SOUZA, 2017, p. 8, our translation). Analyzing the teacher's words, it becomes evident that in the context of work and the pandemic, she needed to adapt to maintain consistency, even with the involvement of parents who were engaged in the collaborative knowledge-building process.

Dear Mothers and Students:

I was placing your drawings and texts in a PowerPoint presentation. I don't know if you agree with or like the changes. If you are not in favor, you can change them as you wish. In this way, it is easier for the other group colleagues to send from one to another. So, the rest of the colleagues are adding a slide as an image and text (SM, June 10, 2020, our translation).

The correspondence presented in this context constitutes a record of a formative process during the pandemic. This involved the training of a student teacher during a highly disruptive period, the movement of parents engaged in more direct collaboration with the school, and the activity of the teacher responsible for coordinating practices and reflecting on the set of actions developed in conjunction with the school.

These aspects are related to biographical research, which is established as:

The ethical dimension of its approach, namely the concern to clarify the conditions under which speaking of oneself can constitute for the subject a vector for appropriating their history and their project and thus contribute to an emancipatory perspective for individuals and human groups (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2016, p. 146, our translation).

In this context, we assert the importance of giving voice to professionals, especially as they are a group with significant responsibilities in terms of pedagogical knowledge, enabling the production of dissemination based on the participants' experiences.

Discussion and Conclusions

Understanding, conceiving, managing, and developing a university curriculum involves recognizing that future teachers of the first cycle of Basic Education - our students in initial training - are destined to become highly qualified professionals.

In the scenario of successive changes decreed in various sectors, educational activities at all levels of schooling never came to a complete halt. Institutions never wholly closed their doors, there was always someone who imperatively ensured that this did not happen. Teachers were compelled to adapt their pedagogical practices and rethink the ways of learning and teaching, seeking solutions to the daily challenges and dilemmas of their profession, but in
different contexts and distinct ways: playing their role as educators without being physically present in schools but paving the way for the participation of other agents.

It is important to emphasize that access to computer equipment by students was essential, enabling them to carry out the activities and the interest and support of families during this process. These elements were crucial for the success of the experience. Furthermore, on the part of the collaborating teacher, there was not only a willingness to receive and guide the student teacher but also an openness to explore new working approaches and listen to and understand the proposals of the university's practice coordinator to develop new strategies that allowed for more effective support of students during the pandemic and social isolation period.

In addition to the acquired learning, the importance of dialogue, affectionate communication, and flexibility in the face of the conditions provided and achieved in each context and experience are emphasized. Furthermore, it is relevant to emphasize that this was just one experience, and many others are necessary to broaden our understanding of the stories and narratives that reveal teachers' experiences during this period.

REFERENCES


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