

Paulo Freire and the methodology of thematic investigation for permanent teacher education

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This text presents the principles which were the basis of permanent teacher education, as it was constructed and applied in the city of São Paulo's public school system, during the period in which Paulo Freire was the Municipal Secretary of Education. The article also highlights the methodology of thematic investigation (Freire, 1987), within the paradigm of Action Research, as it brings a new perspective to teacher education, understood as a path to help teachers gain a deeper understanding, and to critically evaluate their own practices. The research on the relevance of Paulo Freire's thought nowadays is presented, in this text, as part of the work that has been developed at the Paulo Freire *Cathedra* at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), in Brazil. Amongst the empirical works, within the ambit of this research, emphasis will be given to a doctoral thesis which adopts Freire's concept of permanent teacher education and, at the same time, applies the methodology of thematic investigation as the principal methodological process, recreating this proposal in the context of teacher education-research.

Key words: Paulo Freire, permanent education, teacher education, thematic investigation, Paulo Freire *Cathedra*

Paulo Freire y la metodología de investigación temática para la formación permanente de profesores

Este texto presenta los principios que estuvieron en la base de la formación permanente de profesores, como fue construido y aplicado en el

sistema de escuelas públicas de la ciudad de São Paulo durante el periodo en el que Paulo Freire fue Secretario Municipal de Educación. El artículo también destaca la metodología de la investigación temática (Freire, 1987), dentro del paradigma de la investigación acción, ya que aporta una nueva perspectiva a la formación de profesores, entendida como un camino para ayudar a los profesores a obtener una comprensión más profunda y para evaluar críticamente sus propias prácticas. La investigación sobre la relevancia del pensamiento de Paulo Freire en la actualidad, se presenta, en este texto, como parte del trabajo que se ha desarrollado en la Cátedra Paulo Freire en la Pontificia Universidad Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP), en Brasil. Entre los trabajos empíricos, dentro del ámbito de esta investigación, se dará énfasis a una tesis doctoral que adopta el concepto de Freire de formación permanente de profesores y, al mismo tiempo, aplica la metodología de la investigación temática como el principio del proceso metodológico, recreando esta propuesta en el contexto de la investigación de formación de profesores.

Palabras clave: Paulo Freire, educación permanente, formación de profesores, investigación temática, Cátedra Paulo Freire

Introduction

This text presents the principles that were the basis of permanent teacher education, as it was constructed and applied in the city of São Paulo's public school system during the period in which Paulo Freire was the Municipal Secretary of Education.

The article also highlights the methodology of thematic investigation (Freire, 1987), within the paradigm of Action Research. This proposal brings a new perspective to teacher education, understood as a path to help teachers gain a deeper understanding, and to critically evaluate their own practices. This is a new focus that makes it possible to overcome a serious obstacle in in-service teacher education, which is, the distance between classroom practice and the work developed in teacher education programmes.

The argumentative structure of the article begins with a consideration of the concept of "public, popular and democratic education", defended by

Freire, and continues by elaborating a synthesis of the educational policy which was implemented by his administration, with the aim of showing how the principles of the Freirean pedagogy became concrete through the practice which he called *curriculum reorientation movement*, the context within which permanent teacher education was given effect.

The research on the relevance of Paulo Freire's thought nowadays is presented, in this text, as part of the work that has been developed at the Paulo Freire *Cathedra* at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), in Brazil. Amongst the empirical works, within the ambit of this research, emphasis will be given to a doctoral thesis that adopts Freire's concept of permanent teacher education and, at the same time, applies the methodology of thematic investigation as the principal methodological process, recreating this proposal in the context of teacher education-research.

Public, popular and democratic education in the Freire administration¹

The concrete realisation of the political-pedagogical proposal², in the Paulo Freire administration, introduced a new logic to the process of curriculum construction in Brazil. To reorient the curriculum in accordance with a critical-emancipatory rationality implied taking into consideration the dialectic relation between the historical-cultural-social-political context and the curriculum. Work was done on the construction of a school orientated towards the social and critical development of the students, a school that was serious about the appropriation and recreation of knowledge and, at the same time, about the creation of a joyful environment, encouraging solidarity and curiosity. The practice of this new logic constantly took into account the necessary participation of teachers, emphasising collective work and teacher education.

¹ The period 1989-1992 was known as the Freire administration, given that the proposals of educational policies, defined at the beginning of his administration continued during the entire period of the mandate of the Mayor, under the direction of Secretary Mario Sergio Cortella.

² See "A Construção do Currículo na Teoria e Prática de Paulo Freire", in Apple & Nóvoa (1998).

The work to improve the quality of public municipal education meant proposals for changes to the internal relations within the school and the relation school/population. It was also understood that the school should be open so that the population could participate in the process to “change the face of the school”, in the words of Paulo Freire, to give it new spirit, new life, and more than anything, to critically reform knowledge as a necessary condition for emancipation. Community participation in the creation of culture and education broke with the tradition that only the elite are competent, and know the necessities and the interests of the population.

It was about the reconstruction and the implementation of Paulo Freire’s proposal, in relation to the acquisition and construction of knowledge. The organisation of the programme that was to be developed in the schools, based on the elaboration of the generative themes identified by students and teachers through the study of the reality of the region, demanded the creation of a new work architecture in the school, due to the necessity to break with a way of thinking which had been installed for 60 years in the school system, and which was characterised by curriculum proposals defined through a “top-down” approach, by those in superior positions in the Secretary of Education, generating individualised work on the part of teachers, with a view to depositing knowledge in the supposedly “empty heads” of the students. Work in a counter-hegemonic direction demanded discussion and the need to assume a clear position in relation to a polemic question, still present for education specialists who work with curriculum today, that is: what kind of knowledge is important?

Within the new logic proposed by the Freire administration, the definition and the work on the curriculum demanded a change of values and beliefs on the part of teachers, administrators, families and parents, in relation to education. It required from teachers, especially, that they evaluate and make choices with regard to new beliefs, perceive and change installed habits, construct new knowledge and practices, be disposed to work collectively, and be open to dialogue.

Since the beginning of his administration, it became evident to Paulo Freire that “to change the face of the school” in the direction of the radical pedagogy that he was proposing, simultaneous actions would be necessary.

Together with the democratisation of the administration and the reorientation of the curriculum, it was necessary to create a new equally radical proposal for teacher education, capable of responding to the demands of comprehension and performance of a teacher within this school with the new physiognomy that was being envisaged.

Teacher education

Permanent education, for Paulo Freire, implies the understanding that human beings are incomplete, “unfinished”, and considers it humanity's ontological vocation to call us out of and beyond ourselves. Permanent education, therefore, is not only intended for teachers during their basic studies, but for all human beings at all stages of their existence. Permanent education parts from the understanding that it must focus on concrete reality, on practical reality. From this, follows the comprehension that a permanent teacher education programme demands work based on the practices that teachers already have. Paulo Freire used to say that by starting from the practice that the teachers have, one must discover what the “built in theory” is or what the fragments of theory are that are involved in the practice of each teacher, even if he or she does not know what that theory is.

In “Pedagogy of Freedom”, Freire adds:

The knowledge that spontaneous teaching practice, or “unarmed”, almost spontaneous teaching practice, undoubtedly produces, is naive knowledge; knowledge of past experience, which lacks the methodological rigor that characterises the epistemological curiosity of the subject. [...] By focusing on oneself through reflection about practice, it is necessary to allow, that naive knowledge, perceived as such, can start to become critical. (Freire, 2008, p. 38).

Within his work as the Secretary of Education, Paulo Freire (1991) was deeply committed to permanent teacher education. In his own words:

One of the most important programmes to which I am deeply committed is permanent teacher education, based on the understanding that teachers need a serious and competent political-pedagogical practice that responds to the new physiognomy of the school that we are striving to construct (p. 80).

The basic principles of the permanent teacher education programme were presented in the following manner: a) the teacher is the subject of his or her practice, and by carrying it out he or she creates and recreates this practice; b) teacher education must provide instruments so that the teacher may create and recreate his or her practice through reflection about his or her daily experiences; c) teacher education must be constant and systematic as practice is made and remade; d) pedagogical practice requires the comprehension of the very genesis of knowledge, that is, of how the process of knowing occurs and develops; e) the teacher education programme is a necessary condition for the curriculum reorientation process; f) the basic axes of the teacher education programme need to serve the physiognomy of the school that is desired, as a horizon to which the new pedagogical proposal looks, and must also serve the need to provide teachers with basic educational elements and to help them take possession of the scientific advances of human knowledge that can contribute to the quality of the school that is desired. (Freire, 1991).

Permanent teacher education was developed, above all, through “education-groups”, a work mode which brought together teacher collectives to discuss their practices. This work consisted in developing the fragments of theory that already existed in these practices with a view to recreate theory and practice in a constant movement of action-reflection-action. It was hoped that, within the group, teachers could have an experience of the same process that was being suggested for them to develop with students in the schools where they worked. That is, a practice of analysing and criticising reality, by exploring a dialogical methodology, allowing for the construction of knowledge based on the understanding that both teacher and student are cognitive, emotive, social, historic subjects.

The main focus of these groups was the school itself and the programme was supplemented with other educational resources: lectures, courses, congresses and cultural activities, in different localities. Within this extensive programme, the integration of the University was achieved in an innovative manner, based on the understanding that the university and the public system could both be learners and teachers in this dialogue.

Research at the Paulo Freire *Cathedra* at the PUC-SP³

Paulo Freire was a Professor at PUC-SP, since his return from exile, for a period of 17 years (1980-1997). After he passed away, PUC-SP created, in his memory, the Paulo Freire *Cathedra*, in the second semester of 1998, under the direction of the Education: Curriculum Graduate Programme.

The *Cathedra* is a special place for the development of studies and research based on and about the work of Paulo Freire, focusing on its theoretical and practical repercussions for education and its potential to seed new thoughts. Each semester, this academic space offers a course at the post-graduate level.

The work at the *Cathedra* has been to create/recreate a teaching space that is coherent with the constitutive principles of Freirean pedagogy, in such a way as to respect the culture and knowledge of the students, and produce critical-transformative knowledge in a dialogical and collective manner, without dichotomising teaching and research, theory and practice.

In the context of teaching-learning, practice is brought to the classroom through the intentionality of the students' research, the representations of reality and the experiential knowledge formed by the students/researchers. In this manner, teaching and research interweave and overlap, mediated by theory and practice.

The wide scope of research that is developed at the *Cathedra*, in relation to the thought and repercussions of Freire's proposals in Brazilian public school systems, is entitled: Paulo Freire today: legacy and reinvention.

This research brings together 28 researchers belonging to 13 Institutions of Higher Education, situated in 10 States from different regions of Brazil, which integrate the Freirean Network of Researchers (Rede Freireana de Pesquisadores – <http://www.redefreireana.com.br>). The research has two investigative directions. One seeks to analyse the materiality and the reinvention of aspects of Freire's pedagogy, in the present day, and the other is dedicated to empirical research, of an interventionist nature, with the objec-

³ See "O pensamento de Paulo Freire no campo de forças das políticas públicas de currículo: a democratização da escola" (Saul & Silva, 2011).

tive of (re)creating pedagogical practices inspired by a Freirean educational matrix. The reports of these studies are registered in dissertations and theses.

Amongst the empirical works that are developed within the context of this research, focusing on teacher education, we highlight in this article, the doctoral thesis of Alexandre Saul who adopts Freire's concept of permanent teacher education and, at the same time, applies the methodology of thematic investigation as a methodological process, recreating this proposal in the context of teacher education-research. This work proposes to develop and analyse a practice of teacher education through an Action Research design, based on principles of Freirean pedagogy, making it possible to highlight the obstacles that stand in the way of permanent teacher education and enable participants to reconstruct their educative practices.

We will now present a synthesis of the method used in the research.

The methodology of thematic investigation as a path for teacher education

This research work, developed at Doctorate level, was inspired by the methodology of thematic investigation created by Paulo Freire, which can be considered within the paradigm of Action Research.⁴ According to Diniz-Pereira (2011), based on Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994), this model of Action Research gave rise, especially in Latin America, to a line of research commonly called participatory research.

Within the Freirean perspective, education and research cannot avoid the responsibility of providing support to oppressed groups, valuing cultural heritage and local knowledge, and challenging the current social order and the neo-technicist logic of scientific production.

The methodology of thematic investigation, in accordance with problem-posing education (Freire, 1987), makes it possible for those involved in the educative process to assume their roles as subjects of their historical praxis and of their own emancipation, in solidarity with other subjects. This is

⁴ Ardoino (1988, p.78) maintains that Action Research, as a paradigm, represents an epistemological and methodological alternative to other approaches to the analysis of reality.

because, for Freire, the method is not conceived as a collection of rules and techniques to mechanically reach a desired result, but rather, as a “way of proceeding” within the specific circumstances of each case, and as a creative act which must serve and be in accordance with a theory of knowledge.

Freire justifies the importance of the active participation of all individuals involved in research work, saying: “The more active an attitude men and women take in regard to the exploration of their thematics, the more they deepen their critical awareness of reality and, in spelling out those thematics, take possession of that reality” (Freire, 2005, p. 106).

Thematic investigation was thus named, because, according to Freire (1987), the “meaningful thematic” or the “generative themes” of the subjects must be derived through a collective and problem posing research process, and cannot be defined *a priori*, based on the personal criteria of the coordinator of the study. The themes are contained in the subjects’ world view; they are expressions of thought and action in relation to historic reality, that is, to concrete existential situations that the subjects make explicit through language, in dialogue.

Thematic investigation seeks to reveal generative themes that are concealed by the limit-situations experienced by individuals and perceived by them as situations of oppression for which there is no alternative, other than to adapt oneself to that reality. In the process of identification and critical analysis of the subjects’ meaningful thematic, the fragmented vision that obscures their reality is overcome, and a deeper knowledge of the analysed totality is constructed. The objective is to understand, together with the subjects, the reality that confronts them, in a constant movement of deconstruction and reconstruction of praxis.

The goals of thematic investigation cannot be separated from an historical and collective project for the rigorous production of knowledge, neither from social and political actions, indicating the purpose and relevance of such a project. The demands and objectives of thematic investigation are found in the words of Freire, mentioned below:

The methodology proposed requires that the investigators and the people (who would normally be considered objects of that investigation) should act as *co-investigators* (Freire, 2005, p. 106).

[...] thematic investigation cannot be reduced to a purely mechanical act, as it is a process of investigation, of building knowledge, of creation. So it is necessary that the investigating subjects discover ways to interpret problems in the context of the meaningful thematic. The underlying objective of the investigation is to perceive how and what the individuals think about their reality, not to make them “consumers” of “culture” but to allow them to be creators of culture. In this way the investigation of thought may be an act of cultural creation and not of consumption. And as a creative act, as with all human acts, it cannot escape being communicative, dialogical, and participative (Freire, 2014, p. 103-106, our translation).

The different moments of thematic investigation are described by Paulo Freire in Chapter 3 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1987, p. 103-120). These moments, which can never actually be truly separated, whose characteristics interweave and overlap include: seeing, hearing, questioning, discussing and analysing reality to develop a critical understanding of that reality, and transform it.

Taking Freire’s work as inspiration, in general terms, three fundamental moments of thematic investigation are described, and become a reference for the investigative and formative actions of this research:

- 1) Reading of reality: implies posing problems with regard to the concrete practices of the participants of the research, in dialogue with them, identifying the emphases, conflicts and contradictions of their limit-situations, seeking to make apparent their meaningful thematic, based on their world views and their explicative hypotheses for the limit-situations. This moment is characterised by the effort to understand what the concrete reality is, by way of a “pedagogy of the question”. In this context, the act of questioning cannot be a result of an intellectual game. What is most important is to make connections, whenever possible, between the questions and answers and actions that have been practiced by the participants.
- 2) Critical analysis of reality: is the moment in which a critical detachment is made from the reality under consideration in order to deepen the understanding of the generative themes and the explicative hypotheses to the limit-situations, raised during the problematisation of the practice. This is the moment to search for the reasons behind the hypotheses, through the

aid of new practical-theoretical contributions which make it possible to confront and go beyond the earlier knowledge, revealing its multiple dimensions and inter-relations, allowing in this way for the perception of the limit-situations in their totality and a vision of a new reality that could be constructed.

- 3) Elaboration of proposals for action: contemplates collective and dialogical proposition of actions, at different levels, from the most immediate and subjective (local), to the macro-structural, with a view to overcome the social contradictions implicit and explicit in the generative themes derived from the limit-situations raised and analysed, with the participants of the research, in the earlier moments. The knowledge produced through the course of the thematic investigation should point to the complexity of the solutions posed in relation to the problems that are faced, as well as the identification of new contradictions and new limits that will demand further research action, thus feeding back into the process,

These moments of thematic investigation and the raising of generative themes, according to the proposal of Paulo Freire (1987, 1981), operate within that which he denominated “thematic investigation circles” and “culture circles”. These political-pedagogical practices are understood here, in a general form, as intentional and planned research and educational activities, in which the subjects meet to make explicit their values and construct knowledge.

Having derived the group’s meaningful thematic, the construction of an educative programme begins, derived from the thematic investigation and that which may give it continuity. The programmatic content, based on the generative themes, is selected by the co-ordinator of the work, through a process which Freire denominated “thematic breakdown”. This action “splits the total themes in search of their fundamental nuclei, which are the partial elements. The codification process attempts to re-totalise the disjointed theme in the representation of existential situations” (Freire, 2005, p. 121). The objective of this process is to reach a total epistemological and methodological organisation of the knowledge necessary to support the didactic-

pedagogical work of the critical analysis of the social practice of the participants, with consistency and rigor (Silva, 2004).

The educative programme that results from the process of thematic breakdown is developed in culture circles, in which subjects enter a dialogue mediated by the objects of knowledge that correspond to the programmatic content. This programme, formed from the necessities and burning preoccupations of the group, is returned to the group by the coordinator of the investigation in a systematised and expanded form: as a problem to be resolved and not as mere content to be inculcated in the subjects.

In the thematic investigation it is assumed that the entire research action is also an educational action in which the learning content has an intrinsic relation to the learning process. This principle demands of the coordinator of the investigation the clarity that their investigative action is also a teaching practice, and, as such, must be consistent with the assumptions of problem-posing education. In this sense, the task of the co-ordinator is not to simply transfer knowledge, but rather, through the exercise of critical thought together with the other subjects of the group, to challenge them to go beyond the understanding that they have of reality and whenever necessary, contribute with explanations, information and clarifications about the concepts being developed and about the work methodology. For this, the co-ordinator needs to cultivate an open, curious and humble attitude, be available to reconsider their position and learn together with the individuals who they are teaching, without ever separating the act of teaching from the act of learning.

The following section describes the process of education-research, the object of the thesis of Alexandre Saul (2015), developed in the workshop, “Change is difficult, but possible and urgent: a transformative-critical practice for teacher education”.

Planning and execution of educational actions – the workshop “Change is difficult, but possible and urgent: a transformative-critical practice for teacher education”

The research was developed in the Programme of Post-Graduate Studies in Education: Teacher Educator Education, at PUC-SP, a Professional Masters

course.⁵ In this course, the school environment is recognised as a starting point as well as an arrival point for the knowledge constructed in the education of teacher educators. The course offers master students a chance to work with academic knowledge and knowledge acquired through professional practice, conceiving both sources as valid, important and necessary for consistent, coherent, and ethically responsible teacher education. Eleven teachers participated as students in the course.

The work with teacher educators, developed in the workshop, had the following objectives: a) seek new directions for teaching actions, committed to critical-emancipatory education; b) identify obstacles that interfere with the progress of the in-service teacher education of the participants; c) critically analyse the obstacles found, and d) expand the understanding of the group with regards to continuing teacher education, from the perspective of Freirean permanent education. This implied working with participating teacher educators to make advances in relation to the understanding of the real difficulties faced in the professional context, and to offer the chance to have an experience of a methodology for teacher education inspired by Paulo Freire's pedagogy.

The in-service teacher education practices in actual use by the participants of the research, and the obstacles perceived by them in the development of the pedagogical work in their professional environments, were the starting points for the education-research work. In relation to these practices, abundant with knowledge, experience, feelings and emotions, problems were posed, together with the educators themselves, to enable them to highlight through their own examination, necessities, problematic situations and inherent contradictions, with a view to progress. Through the educative actions developed in this research, an attempt was made to deconstruct instituted pedagogical practices, delineate new perspectives on in-service teacher

⁵ The Professional Masters is a Masters course "aimed at the development of professionals, in different academic areas, through the study of techniques, processes, or themes that serve the demands of the labor market in some way" (CAPES, 2014). The research developed by students of this course is required to have close relevance to the real problems faced by them in their area of their professional activity.

education and generate proposals that would allow for the reorientation of existing practices.

The moments of thematic investigation, described above, guided the organisation of the workshop which included twelve educational meetings, during the period of March to June, 2014, and were distributed in the following manner:

- Reading of reality: meetings 1, 2, 3, and 4
- Critical analysis of reality: meetings 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10
- Elaboration of proposals for action: meetings 11 and 12

The planning and development of these meetings included the following procedures and instruments for the production and collection of data: listing of bibliographic items as reference material for the discussions, teacher education meetings, elaboration of meeting plans, selection of content and support material, selection and creation of group activities and theatre games, field notes, document analysis, application of questionnaires, and communication with specialists in education.

Many of these procedures and instruments were used in a recurrent manner, although, with variations in relation to the objective of each meeting and workshop and the specific choice of activities to be realised. For this reason, they will be presented together in this text.

The listing of bibliographic references was indispensable to the construction of the education-research actions and an important support during the entire process. Theory was understood as a necessary living element for intervening in and analysing reality.

The meetings of the workshops were inspired by thematic investigation circles and by elements of cultures circles.

The weekly preparation of the meeting plans was indispensable so as to not lose sight of the direction of the research. This practice helped with the organisation of actions according to the available work time, with the making of decisions about procedures and the strategies which were being used, and with the organisation of content that had already been worked upon. The elaboration of a general, albeit provisional plan for each workshop allowed

for a global vision of the path to be taken, in tune with the moments characterised for the realisation of the thematic investigation: reading of reality, critical analysis of reality and the elaboration of proposals for action. This broader vision made it possible to maintain on the horizon the planning of educative actions that could be tested within the participant's reality, based on the changes and knowledge produced during the workshop. The plans could never become a "straight jacket" for the work, but were consistent structures from which it was possible to allow space for creativity, unforeseen occurrences and freedom within the educational process.

The contents of the meetings emerged from the necessity to understand the limit-situations presented by the participants, from the theories required by the proposed educational activity, and from the discussion of principles and methods of thematic investigation and Freirean pedagogy. The materials used to develop the programmatic content in the workshop, whether texts, short videos, films, extracts from newspapers and other sources, became fundamental theoretic elements, examples or provocations which helped to pose problems with regard to the limit-situations and the unveiling of reality.

The work with different artistic languages, especially with theatre, capable of synthesising different forms of human expression, demanded the selection, creation and recreation of activities and games that could help to give concrete form to some of the concepts investigated in the workshop and also to build energy, atmosphere and different focus' of attention in the meetings.

The preparation of the activities, from a problem-posing perspective, had to be in harmony with the objectives planned for each meeting, and also had to take into account relevance and difficulty levels. Within the processes chosen for the organisation of dialogues between the subjects and for developing the critical understanding of the concepts developed in the workshop, an option was made to build a thematic network as a way of going beyond a simple record of the work that was being realized. This meant creating a collective representation and systematisation of Freire's (1987) thematic breakdown, with the group of participants, in order to construct their educational program based on their generative themes.

The thematic network is a systematic approach developed by Silva (2004) that makes it possible to analyse, from an overall perspective, the meaningful

comments of the subjects of a thematic investigation; that is, those comments that express the greatest conflict experienced by the subjects, according to their reality, keeping in view the construction of an educational programme that allows them to go beyond a less critical vision of their own practice and to engage them in transformative actions.

The meaningful comments are selected by the co-ordinator of the investigation from records of dialogues made during the initial stages of the work. A search is made for comments which present dissatisfaction with conflicts, from the participants' point of view, but which also reflect contradictions in the social practices of those individuals, in their conceptions of the world and in the limitations of their explications of the conflicts experienced.

Problems are posed in relation to the meaningful comments that are chosen in an attempt to make them more explicit and establish relations between them, aiming to identify the greatest problem that, according to the group, expresses a synthesis of their concerns and the limits imposed on them: or in other words, aiming to identify, their generative theme. A "counter-theme" is also elaborated which, in dialectic opposition to the generative theme, "the starting point for pedagogical work" (Silva, 2004, p. 199, our translation), represents the goal for the transformation of social practice which is desired by the group.

A search then begins for general elements of knowledge that will form the programmatic content of the teaching process, through successive rounds of problem-posing in relation to the generative theme, with questions being raised in a descriptive, analytical and prepositive order, paying attention to the counter-theme as a parameter for the selection of knowledge that can help in the building of the new understanding of reality that is sought to be constructed. Problem-posing in relation to the generative theme is also realised at different levels, starting from the particular dimension of reality under examination, passing through meso and macro levels of social organisation, with a praxiological perspective, that is, investigating reality not only from a local and objective point of view, but also in relation to a variety of dimensions which make it up: sociocultural, political, economic, and others, linking practice and theory in a dialectic movement of action-reflection-action, with a transformative perspective (Silva, 2004; Freire, 1979).

The direction taken in the education-research, including the construction of the thematic network, was used to develop the meaningful programme for the group, based on the following generative theme: “I verified that what is worked in the in-service teacher education programme is not being implemented into the daily practice of teachers at school. I have the impression that the teacher education activities are not making sense”. This generative theme gave rise to content topics such as: a) the education plan for educators; b) the school management team's relations with the continuing education of teachers; c) school accountability and educational policy; d) the presence or absence of the teachers' world view in the continuing education programmes; and e) critical seizure of the practice contexts of teachers and their validation as content and starting point of the in-service teacher education programmes. Respecting the requirement to start studying reality from the local level towards the macro, then, get back to the local level with an increased knowledge of the studied object, the first topic selected to proceed with the development of the educational program constructed with the group was: “the education plan for educators”.

This topic was debated and studied with the participants, within an activity in which they had to develop teacher education proposals, under this thematic, from a dialogical perspective, by choosing theoretical elements and dynamics, to critically analyze and develop the selected content topic with a group of teacher educators that would be experiencing problems to make their work of teacher education more effective and meaningful.

All the meetings were recorded in audio with the due consent of the participants of the workshop. The meetings were also recorded in written notations, in field dairies and photographic records, which became important sources for the selection and analysis of research data.

The results of the education-research thus realised are presented below.

The learning that resulted from the research: The voice of the participants

The overall teacher educator education process requires an evaluation of the results obtained and of the learning that was constructed.

Even though, throughout the entire period of the workshop, all the educational meetings ended with a moment of evaluation in which the participants could comment on the process and the results of the work being developed in each session, on two specific occasions, structured evaluations were given, in the form of a questionnaire which was completed by the participants.

The first questionnaire was given at the end of the twelve meetings of the workshop and the questions centered on the expectations of the participants, perspectives for change in their professional practices and the learning that had been acquired. One year after the education-research had ended, in May, 2015, the participant educators were invited to an evaluation meeting to discuss the possible impacts of the workshop in the personal and professional sphere as well as in the specific localities in which they worked. The new questionnaire was elaborated and sent to the subjects by email three days earlier, so that the group could respond to the questions beforehand, preparing their evaluative reflections for the meeting.

The results that were obtained make it possible to affirm that the objectives of the investigation were reached to a profound and wide reaching extent. The affirmations of the participant educators which follow,⁶ derived from the questionnaires that were given, demonstrate, almost in their totality, the satisfaction of the group with the educational process and with the gains achieved, on individual and collective levels. The rare divergences simply refer to differences as to the value attributed to the advances, by the subjects.

The research resulted in the construction of a path of investigation and education which was recognised by the participants as a proposal that sought to unite theory and practice, and that arose through the necessities and interests of these educators.

The following examples of answers given to the questionnaires testify to this conclusion:

The workshop was an effective proposal, considering that it was developed out of the necessity perceived by the co-ordinator in discourse with the students. (Educator K)

⁶ To preserve the identity of the subjects participating in this research, names have not been used in this text.

The workshop provided an opportunity for the construction of knowledge based on action and reflection. It was an opportunity to have an experience of concrete and meaningful situations. There was an active and reflexive form of appropriation, construction and production of theoretical and practical knowledge. (Educator F).

The workshop made it possible for participants to identify and understand the main reasons for the obstacles that interfere with continuing teacher education, aiming to project possibilities for overcoming these difficulties.

The participants made the following statements about learning in relation to the obstacles involved in in-service teacher education and the possibilities for overcoming these difficulties:

[...] we don't always have the freedom to apply what we learn in courses and workshops given for our education as teacher educators. This is because, the directives of the Secretaries for Education, may have other focuses, for example, the application of large scale external evaluations and continuous and intensive recuperation processes of students. (Educator C.)

Lack of time was a very present obstacle in my educational meetings. The understanding of the reasons for this obstacle lead me to establish a routine of defining the planning and discussion of educational themes collectively, improving the work. (Educator D).

The educators broadened their understanding about continuing education for teachers, according to a critical-emancipatory perspective.

In this sense, the respondents reveal that they were clearly satisfied with regard to their expectations, as may be seen in the questionnaires where they note that:

To hear what a teacher has to say is the first step to a continuing education which proposes a transformative action. (Educator N).

The theoretical material made available [in the workshop], as well as the discussions which occurred during the meetings, were important for my learning, as were too the syntheses that we received after each meeting, which made it possible to reflect on aspects that involve teacher education from a critical perspective. (Educator C).

The workshop provided an opportunity for educators to gain a critical understanding of a methodology for teacher education inspired by Paulo Freire's pedagogy.

The educators demonstrated satisfaction and hope for having learnt elements of Freire's methodological proposal that, once reinvented in the context of their practices, could serve as support in the development of their actions as teacher educators:

[...] to be able to revisit Paulo Freire, who's proposals and ways of thinking about education are always very up to date, to gain knowledge, to have a new look at the practice of teaching, together with a group of people from such widely different realities, was marvelous. (Educator F).

I never understood Paulo Freire's pedagogy, now I partly understand it, and with the little I know I can advance with my pedagogical actions. To get to know a teaching methodology which starts with the meaningful comments of students was totally new for me. To build a curriculum starting from a generative theme was surprising. It's possible to create educational activities based on the real necessities of teachers, seeking to reflect, with them, on what, how, when and why their practices produce effects, or not, in the students' learning. (Educator N).

It was possible to identify transformative movements in the ways in which the participants think and act, in relation to teacher education and the adherence to new values.

Even though the evaluation of the contexts of the educative practices was not an objective of this thesis, the participants of the research were encouraged to think about the possible impact of the learning that had been gained through the workshop. The response of the educators indicated the following directions:

The workshop made me reflect on my practices. In the course of the workshop I was able to rethink some of the situations of my work, looking to make changes with my team of teachers. The exchanges of experience between the participants of the workshop were very beneficial, especially due to the different context in which each person works. I'm re-evaluating my practices as a co-ordinator and an educator. I'm already preparing different meetings with the current teaching staff, with the objective of improving working relationships. (Educator B).

My practice as a popular educator has gained consistency. I think that I'm posing problems with greater tranquility, dialoguing with what my students bring, introducing my own personal references, and exercising, with honesty, the proposal to teach and learn in an environment where no one is the keeper of knowledge, but where knowledge passes through us and re-forms one another. (Educator A).

The workshop further consolidated my work as a teacher educator. I strive to constantly challenge myself to go beyond the limits of what I can explain. My dialogues are becoming more caring; before, I used to make harsh judgements about the "other", based on my principles, values and habits. These days, I try to take care to see that my relations have, as a basic principle, dialogue in all situations. (Educator D).

Although this education-research work with its methodology of thematic investigation has been extremely demanding, due to its density and complexity, requiring intense dedication and time for study, careful preparation of the meetings and systematic organisation of the process, a great deal of learning was recorded in the trajectory of the research co-ordinator of the investigation.

The co-ordinator reported having acquired, through the process, important learning about the planning and administration of the work of teacher education, from an Action Research perspective. This methodology demands of the co-ordinators of these actions, "attentive listening" to the group as well as flexibility to deal with unforeseen circumstances, which can effect each educational meeting and also the overall schedule of the research. It also requires an "impatient-patience" to experience in unison with the other participants, each phase of the action-reflection cycle, with its due rhythm, to avoid turning the research into a search for immediate solutions to the problems of educational practice.

In a qualitative approach to research, the subjectivity of the researcher is always present in the choice of selected elements of knowledge on which the investigation is based. The unveiling of reality demands, however, that the researcher maintains a methodological distance, so that her or his personal interests and prejudices do not exclusively determine the choice of procedures and instruments, the organisation of the actions or the priorities of the investigation.

The involvement which the researcher has as the object of her or his investigation demands methodological rigour and discipline, so as to avoid the production of distorted results which do not contribute to the advancement of knowledge. Methodological rigour and organisation are, therefore, crucial for the researcher to be able to articulate, in a coherent, consistent and politically responsible manner, theories, methods and techniques, through the difficult and demanding task of learning to expose reality.

Through the research that was realised here, the co-ordinator also points out the necessity to pay attention to the “ideological reading” of the group of participants and of the context of the work, seeking to identify, with the greatest possible clarity, the power relationships that are implicit and explicit, that can help or hinder the construction of adhesion between the subjects in accordance with the new work proposal, resulting in the continuation or interruption of the investigation.

The positive results of this education-research cannot omit the observation of certain limitations which could certainly point the way for new experiences for the education of teachers and educators. Within the few limitations that arose, it is worth noting:

According to the participants:

- The time for the development of the meetings was insufficient to allow for more opportunities in which the subjects could share experiences which were being developed in the context of professional activities.
- The theatre games and activities should have been included in all the meetings, as they promote integration and involvement of the group.
- The difficulty of participating in a heterogeneous group whose participants demonstrate distinct “readings of reality”, due to their different origins and experiences.
- The difficulty of conciliating speech and listening in a group, while, in fact, exercising dialogue.
- Learning to accept and value the positions of participants and, when necessary, make respectful criticisms of arguments and not of people.

In the perspective of the co-ordinator of the research, the main limit observed was the difficulty of realising a follow-up of the practices of the participants at the end of the workshop and, in this case, to be able to evaluate the impacts that could indicate the changes in practice resulting from the workshop in the context of the participants professional work.

The results obtained up until this moment point to the necessity to create actions and policies for permanent teacher education that can give materiality and meaning to the continuing education realised in schools.

Final considerations

At a time when a single curriculum is proposed for all schools, and when little is done in terms of public policies to hinder the process of the collapse of education and the scrapping of the teachers profession, what power does a counter-hegemonic teacher education approach have? What actions can be administered within teacher education to allow better understanding and to oppose the policies and practices of dehumanising educational practices, to affect society in a more far reaching manner, and teachers and students within the school in a more direct manner?

The responses to these and other questions are the concern of the professionalisation of teachers, including the education that permits them to study educational practice, with a view to improving their political-pedagogical action within the school space, making it more democratic, meaningful and critical. At the same time, it is necessary to reinforce the collective fight of teachers for better work conditions, to forge alliances with social movements that struggle to defend their rights and conquer space within the media, striving to give visibility and credibility to the knowledge constructed by teachers in schools and universities.

A counter-hegemonic teacher education, founded on the methodology of thematic investigation, can allow teachers to create and experience other constructive forms of logic, different from the common everyday logic that expresses authoritarian positions committed to the interests of capital and the elite classes. It can be seen then, that Paulo Freire's thought can found and

inspire, today, teacher education programmes that have a view to humanising education and promoting social justice.

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