

# Teaching in the History of Education: a transdisciplinary perspective

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## **Abstract**

The study aims to discuss teaching with research in History of Education in a transdisciplinary perspective, using primary sources and new goals. In this way, subjects that were not of interest to traditional history such as educational institutions and the lives of teachers, were studied by the students of a Pedagogy course at a higher education institution. The methodology used was action research, which enabled academics, in addition to the development of skills related to historical research, to analyse data collected from sociological, political, legislative, economic and educational points of view, with links between these different areas. Theoretical support was sought in the work of Nicolescu (1997), Revel (1998), Nóvoa (2002) and Tripp (2005), among others. The results were favorable and showed that differentiated teaching practices enabled the understanding of historical facts in their interrelationships with other sciences.

**Key words:** History of Education, action research, transdisciplinary.

## **La enseñanza de la Historia de la Educación: una perspectiva transdisciplinaria**

El estudio tiene por objetivo discutir la enseñanza con investigación en Historia de la Educación, en una perspectiva transdisciplinaria, con la utilización de fuentes primarias y nuevos objetos. Así, temas que no interesaban a la historia tradicional, como las instituciones escolares y la vida de profesores, fueron investigados por los alumnos del curso de Pedagogía de una institución de educación superior. La metodología adoptada fue la investigación acción, lo que posibilitó a los académicos, además del desarrollo de cualificaciones relacionadas a la investigación histórica, analizar los datos recolectados bajo el punto de vista sociológico, político, legislativo, económico y educacional, con articulación entre esas diferentes áreas. Se buscó apoyo teórico en los trabajos de Nicolescu (1997), Revel (1998), Nóvoa (2002) y Tripp (2005), entre otros. Los resultados fueron favorables y demostraron que la práctica pedagógica diferenciada posibilitó la comprensión de los hechos históricos en sus interrelaciones con otras ciencias.

**Palabras-clave:** práctica pedagógica; transdisciplinaridad; enseñanza con investigación

## Purpose

The rethinking of pedagogical practice in the teaching of the History of Education has been a constant concern of the researcher throughout the many years of teaching in the area. To overcome the positivist conception, the methodologies that make uninteresting and less experiential learning, lack of student awareness as subjects of their own history and, as a consequence, not assuming their role in society, it is necessary to constantly seek differentiated, innovative practices that allow a more committed, effective learning that is at the same time challenging and enjoyable. It is necessary to work, also, so that the student knows that the study of laws and educational policies cannot be taken as a reflection of reality: the practice shows that these documents go through processes of appropriation, assimilation and resistance in their execution. The content worked in the discipline cannot remain foreign and distant from the student world: it is necessary to involve it, seduce it, in the tangle of sources in which history unfolds, turning the school into a place of renewal, of the historicisation of conflict, of awareness of the presence of history in their daily lives and the possibility of interfering in the transformation of the reality in which they live

As Nóvoa (1992) states,

The History of Education is not only important because it provides us the 'memory of educational pathways' (in some cases it may take a certain exemplary position), but above all because it allows us to understand that there is no determinism in the evolution of educational systems, pedagogical ideas or school practices: it is the product of a social construction (Nóvoa 1992, p. 211).

In a training course for teachers, what is the History of Education for? What would be the result of using primary sources, involving events, actors and places within the reach of the students, to rebuild the local history and then insert it into the regional and national context of education? Would linking the local to the regional and then to the national give meaning to historical events, making it possible to establish a dialectical relationship between the unknown past and the known present? Would the student go from a naive curiosity to a critical analysis of reality, maturing and consolidating their citizenship? How is it possible to stimulate a new understanding of reality, in this context?

After transforming those questions into proposals, I have submitted the action research, in a transdisciplinary perspective, to my students of the 2nd period Pedagogy course at a large private university, who accepted the challenge, committing themselves to develop it.

It is important to highlight that, when working with the early grades, they should offer children the knowledge of their history, their family, their neighbourhood and their city, motivated scholars to pursue a practice that also gave them an understanding of their historical identity and their role in society. It is necessary to add also that by working with history in the early grades, the teacher does not always have the studies available that can help them as much as the content, which very focused on the reality of the student, but, nevertheless, can be unveiled with the help of different sources.

This need for the teacher to know the history of local education, which will be worked in elementary school, raises the reflection on the antagonisms and/or interdependencies between local history and national history. The perspective of micro-history, contextualised through an observation scale (Lepetit 1998), enabled the understanding of adjectives such as national, regional and local, defining social spaces in which historical subjects act. This

delimitation of spaces is within the understanding that the location marks the beginning of the investigation, but can only be fully understood in its relationships with the regional and national levels. Working local history does not mean to oppose national history. This cut-out, delimiting a chosen social space, allows for expanding the networks of interdependence and sociability that are realised between subjects. As Revel (1998) explains:

[...] there is no gap, much less opposition, between local history and global history. What the experience of an individual, a group or a space allows one to note is a particular modulation of global history. Particular and unique, because what the micro-historical perspective offers to observation is not an attenuated, or partial or mutilated version of macro-social realities: it is [...] a different version (Revel 1998, p. 28).

By prioritising the location, within the historical period, the details acquire their own meaning, which does not occur in a macroscopic analysis. The dichotomy center/periphery is resized; the universal and local values are crossed; the collective identities are redrawn complementarily. If, on one hand, depending on who evaluates it, as Reis (2007) explains, it can be argued that the passage of global history to micro-history brings losses to the study of history, for those who believe in the possibility of a macro observation of history, establishing all the relations between the parties and social spheres, one can also say that there are gains to those who refuse the traditional history and consider the totalitarian global view that threatens individual liberties, believing that the intervention in society should be localised and timely. The historical reality is made of discontinuities and unconsciousness, and the researcher must seek the convergent time and integrator of consciousness. The elements that are joined, that pass between, beyond and across the disciplines involved, enable an understanding of reality that is different, is open to knowledge, in short, is transdisciplinary.

Thus, with focus on such considerations, the theoretical option for local history is made, in this research, added to the study of the relationship between the past and present, between time and space, dialectically and dialogically considered, in order to provide the dimension of the historical context of the time in which they occurred. It took into account that in an approach of this kind, with transdisciplinary bias, maximum interaction between disciplines should be sought, therefore, with respect to their individuality.

Nicolescu (1997 p. 2) explains: “As the prefix ‘trans’ indicates, transdisciplinarity concerns that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all discipline. Its goal is the understanding of the present world, of which one of the imperatives is the unity of knowledge”.

To facilitate and enhance transdisciplinary teaching for students, I had inspiration in the studies of Frettek and Thorpenberg about transdisciplinary education in health science (2011), which detail the need to provide the students ample studies on sources in historical research, as well as to encourage students to evaluate assignments and to research using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Contact with studies from different disciplines has proved to be important for a transdisciplinary analysis of the collected materials.

All work together for common knowledge, as complete as possible, seeking “an understanding of the complexity of our universe, the complexity of relations between subjects, of subjects with themselves and the objects that surround them in order to recover the sense of the enigmatic relationship of human beings with Reality [...] and that which is Real [...]” (II Congress..., 2005, p. 1).

According to the Transdisciplinarity Charter produced in the First World Congress of Transdisciplinarity in 1994, in the Arrábida Convent in Lisbon, Portugal, and written by Lima de Freitas, Edgar Morin and Basarab Nicolescu, “transdisciplinarity does not seek domination of several disciplines, but aims to open all disciplines to that it crosses and surpasses” (I Congress..., 1994, p. 1).

On the transdisciplinary perspective, Nicolescu (1997, p. 1) states that “A viable education can only be an integral education of the human being. Transdisciplinary education has its origins in the inexhaustible richness of the scientific spirit, which is based on questioning, as well as on the rejection of all *a priori* answers and certitude contradictory to the facts”.

With these assumptions, the project then required the search for primary sources, directed to the study of subjects that did not interest the traditional history, but that the new history favors, such as the school culture, educational institutions and the lives of teachers, among others.

The second topic studied by the students is with respect to the primary sources, covering notions about files, documents, photos, journals, oral sources, audiovisual sources, such as movies, music or television, and archaeological sources.

An effort was made to sensitise students to work with sources, starting from the assertion that “being a historian of the past or present, in addition to other qualities, has always required erudition and sensitivity in the treatment of sources since they depend on a convincing structure in their discourse” (Janotti 2005, p. 10). The possibility of writing an original history, based on not yet worked sources, motivated the group to collect the data. In order to prepare the students for any frustrating situations in locating sources, the lack of habit of preserving the private types of documentation in Brazil was discussed, as well as the destruction of documents, both practices that prevent the researcher from accessing historical knowledge at all levels. Special care should be taken when handling and reproducing ancient documents were mentioned.

To avoid the collection of documents becoming mechanical, creating a pile of loose, unrelated papers, the researcher guided the students on the importance of evaluating the possibilities of the collected sources, contextualizing each document found in its time, trying to understand the meaning of words and expressions contained therein, as well as the quality of information provided by it in relation to the object of research in progress. It would only thus be possible to link text and context, identifying changes and continuities essential to the production of the historical narrative.

The research in journals available in school libraries or in public or private archives was of great value to the realisation of many works. The Internet also has been a strong ally in the search for a great deal of information.

Further guidance provided by the researcher was with respect to oral history as a research methodology and for the compilation of sources. The interviews recorded with people who experienced events of the past requires us to know what and how to question, and at the same time act with ethical behavior, respect, warmth, resourcefulness and skill by the researchers. The use of oral sources in the research determines that the script of interviews is carefully prepared, observing what is contained in the research project.

It was established that the life story of teachers is a source of special interest for pedagogy students. According to Alberti (2005),

[...] the stories of life have the individual himself as of central interest in history, including his trajectory from childhood to the moment he speaks, through the various events and situations that he witnessed, experienced or that he learned. It can be said that the life story interview contains in its interior, several thematic interviews since, throughout the narrative of the course of life, relevant topics for research are deepened (Alberti 2005, p. 175).

The possibility of conducting longer interviews with people considered as representatives in the educational sphere enables a deepening in various issues related to local history.

Special care also should be taken from the preparation to the analysis of the content of the interviews. The technology of recording and deleting with the permission of the interviewee to use of the material should always be observed. In the interpretation and analysis of interviews, it is recommended to take into account other sources, comparing what the respondents say with other documents, seeking greater approximation with reality. This establishment of the ties between the individual interviewed and reality demands that we think about the different time frames inserted in the speech, absences and empty spaces in the speech, as well as the social conditions that constituted their daily lives. It allows, on the other hand, the realization of the “substantial description” mentioned by Geertz (2004), consisting of in depth reports, rich in detail that could not be found in another form.

Reflecting on the history of the school culture, the history of institutions and the teaching profession, among others, has as a corollary understanding the history of education as a privileged moment to think about the concrete situation of the classroom, educational spaces and the role of educational agents, teachers, principals and coordinators.

## Action research

After these considerations, the report of the action research results follows, chosen as a methodological strategy for enabling a broad and explicit interaction between the researcher and the students involved in the learning situation.

One cycle of action research is composed by planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Zuber-Skerrit 1991; Kemmis and McTaggart 1998). Next, you plan for the following cycle. According to Dick (2000 p. 1) in “A beginner’s guide to action research”, “Action research consists of a family of research methodologies which pursue action and research outcomes at the same time”. It tends to be cyclic, participative, qualitative and reflective: similar steps tend to recur, in a similar sequence; the clients and informants are involved as partners; it deals more often with language than with numbers; and critical reflection upon the process and outcomes are important parts of each cycle (Dick, 2000).

As a recommendation for good action research, Dick (2000 p. 5) suggests that one uses multiple cycles and, “within each cycle, use multiple data sources; and try to disprove the interpretations arising from earlier cycles”. Regardless of this, Tripp (2005) explains that

What kind of process one uses, and how one uses it, depend on aims and circumstances, and even with ‘the same’ aims and circumstances, different people may have different skills, intentions, time-lines, levels of support, ways of collaborating, and so on, all of which will affect the processes and outcomes. The important point is that the kind of action inquiry used is appropriate to the aims, practices, participants, situation (and its enablers and constraints) (Tripp 2005, p. 3).

So, in this work, I applied the practices and processes more appropriate to the aims of the research.

Three terms that were in the 2nd semester of the Pedagogy course at a higher education institution were chosen, at the time the program for the course included the study of education in the Brazilian Republic and, as the last state, of education in the state of Paraná. The teacher presented the proposal to work with primary sources related to the History of Education to the students, explaining in detail its procedures and asking for their compliance. With the agreement of the students, the historical approach to be researched was defined, covering the period between 1970 and 1990.

Then, the questions of co-responsibility and the significance of everyone being present at all stages, as well as the possibility of adjustments made during the development work were discussed. In action research, Thiollent (1996) clarifies:

It is necessary to precisely define, on one side, which is the action, which are their agents, their goals and obstacles and, on the other hand, what is the requirement of knowledge to be produced due to the problems encountered in the action or between actors in the situation (Thiollent 1996, p. 16).

At first, the researcher provided the students ample studies on sources in historical research. For this, the texts by Pinsky *et al.* (2005), contained in his work "Historical Sources", and by Alberti (2005), on oral history served as support. Students were asked to reflect on other objects of study beyond the traditional, turning to the history of the cultures of schools, the history of institutions and school practices, the history of the teaching profession and education policies, among others. It was suggested that they seek materials in their homes, in the archives of the schools they went to or in which they worked, in the sectors dedicated to education in Paraná found in the Public Library of Paraná, in the House of Memory in the Public Archives. A viable alternative would be to conduct interviews with faculty, staff and students, drawing on the use of oral history.

To support this reflection, texts by Wachowicz (1972), Miguel (2007), Nascimento (2007) and Saviani (2007) were suggested, and lectures were given on the history of education in Brazil and in Paraná. It also dealt with different conceptions that underlie the historiography, in order to allow the students to choose paths that promote a learning of history more in line with the complexity of reality in which they are a part.

Very enthusiastic, the students then carried out the collection of documents, pictures, newspapers, magazines, newsletters, report cards, books of minutes, diplomas, uniforms, textbooks and other objects, going around libraries, museums, archives and schools, and talking to people who could provide them with information on the source under study. This material, in turn, was identified and interpreted under the guidance of the teacher, who concurrently provided students with historical, sociological, political, legislative and economic assistance needed to interrogate materials and discover the dialectic between the past and present, at the same time in which they inserted local history into the regional and national context. It would only thus be possible to make sense of the historical events contained in the respondents' discourse and the selected sources.

At the end, when everyone had managed to collect enough data to identify the research problem, and then study it, analyse it and deepen it through the available theoretical foundation, it moved on to the preparation of research reports with the results that were subsequently communicated to other colleagues in each of the participating classes. Of these

communications, we can highlight the study of the history of life and teacher training among the preferences of the students. Next came the histories of educational institutions, also with a large number of reports. Last were very specific issues such as the study of textbooks, the graduation ceremony in schools and certain kinds of parties usually held in schools were also chosen.

## Research results, from the students' perspective

In each of the steps in which the proposal developed, contributions from students and teacher interventions were relevant elements, both in reorganizing the work as well as the supply of needs shown in the process.

At the end of the work, a questionnaire was distributed to students of classes involved, containing three open-answer questions, which were answered in class by 81 of the participants. The questions concerned the specific aspects of the studies, seen from the perspective of the students: the importance of researching primary sources for the study of the history of local education; the aid that research brought to the understanding of the History of Education of Paraná; and the contribution of this type of activity to the training of teachers. The results obtained for each of the items are shown below.

### The importance of researching primary sources for the study of the history of the local Education

First, it was stipulated that the participants would be indicated by their initials between parentheses. From the analysis of the replies, it was found that all respondents highly assessed the importance of conducting research in primary sources for the knowledge of the local history of education, an example of which are some expressions:

"I loved it; it is a unique opportunity to get to know the past and value the memory of the people" (M).

"We did not know that the library [refers to the Public Library of Paraná] had such a rich collection. When we got there, we became interested in so many issues that we wanted to do more" (LP).

"Working with the use of sources helped me to understand, to more deeply learn the origin of many customs and traditions, and at the same time the major changes in education" (IR).

"Working with primary sources helped discover things in education that were simply lost or saved, without any value" (DT).

"It allowed us to come across various themes that are part of our routine and which we often don't develop to discover their history and importance" (KT).

"This work came only to revive the pleasure I get in seeking history, hearing it and feeling it, interacting and relating with what we have today" (KD).

Other aspects are highlighted in the responses collected. The first concerned the originality of the work carried out in this way. Students realised that by working with primary sources, not yet used by other researchers, their study would gain in terms of originality. Note the following:

The contact with information, researching sources, is direct and immediate. The use of sources is essential for good research. The results obtained have their value in originality, being unprecedented in terms, thus making the presentation of data much more interesting (MF).

It became clear to the participants, the need to study the history of the city and the state and their interrelations with national history. "Scouring history allows us to have the full conviction and awareness that we are part of a larger story, that is, the experiences mix and combine. It is impossible to separate one from the other" (MA). The work made it possible to "insert the history of the people in world history" (GT).

In addition, the critical and interested view that the methodology of the work with primary sources for the study of the history of education provokes was perceived by students, by referring that, in this way, "you learn a lot more, because you are the one who collects the data, the peculiarities of how and when it happened, turning the acquired learning into a text" (MS). Or: "sources who were at first seen as futile, that only gathered dust, made me and also all those who worked together take interest in the subject" (ZD).

Knowledge of the past and the appreciation of local cultural wealth were present in expressions such as, "it was a unique opportunity to know the past and value the memory of the people" (OM), or "we found the relics very interesting, some things could even be lost over time and that people are very proud to tell" (JP).

In this item of the questionnaire, the importance of knowledge of the number of sources available for the future pedagogue's research was highlighted. One student stated, "The work contributed to learning about education at different times and the presentations brought documents and rich talks about the history of education in Paraná" (CT).

Some students said that research "was very labour intensive, but also very satisfactory" (LA), or even that "they felt a little difficulty in collecting data due to a lack of time" (MS), while others were thankful for the opportunity that they were given: "I appreciate the opportunity to have access to so many beautiful things from our sources" (IR), concluding that "it was a unique experience that will be forever marked in our lives" (JP).

In short, it is possible to mention that, under the student perspective, researching primary sources for the study of the history of local education, in addition to the knowledge that sources offer, adds originality to the work, develops critical and interested view of the story and its sources, constituting a significant element for understanding the local cultural richness. The future pedagogue, in particular, gains particular interest in knowing the amount of existing sources for historical research.

### **From the aid that research brought to the understanding of the History of Education of Paraná**

From the activities carried out, the main goal shown was assisting students in understanding the History of Education of Paraná. In this sense, the second question sought to know if the work had corresponded to this expectation, in which compliance was unanimous, as transcribed in the depositions below.

“In my opinion, the work performed contributed a great deal for me to know the history of Paraná education at various times” (CA).

Another student added (RM): “if we took the books from Paraná, we would just be memorising. So, I listened, I researched, I experienced and took it for life. I proved that history is life and everything is history because everything is life. I loved the work.”

“Only through knowledge can we contribute in some way to our country. With this work, we managed to rescue the history of our state. I learned a lot. My knowledge only broadened” (SA).

In addition to the knowledge of “curriculum, form of entry into school, entrance examinations, subjects found in the entrance examination and many other things” (AN), other advantages of the proposal were added by the students.

The work “helped to see the evolution of education, to reflect on the strictness in schools and disciplines,” mentioned one student (PV). Another added: “In my opinion, the work with sources helped a lot to understand what happened in the times of our parents and grandparents, and what is happening in our time. We can see similarities and differences” (KL).

The need to preserve the sources did not go unnoticed:

Working with sources aroused our curiosity and the need to preserve our history. Seeking and working with sources about graduations, we find that today there is a concern to save ‘real’ files, such as printed articles, photographs – not digital, and their traditions, often stored and reported in newspapers (DR).

Studies that were done on specific topics equally received their collaboration. The study of report cards enabled us to establish that, over the period studied, “they changed a lot. Formerly, they were completed by hand and today they are all typed. Also, the signature of two parents was needed, which was mandatory, since it was the parent’s obligation to see their children’s grades” (AC).

When looking through the textbooks of the past, the student mentioned that the work “besides being very interesting, helped me understand about textbooks, how literacy took place before in comparison to today” (AS).

Another student, who also drew upon oral history, said: “with this work with sources, we were able to rescue the history of education in Paraná, benchmarks before we were born. And when we did the interviews, it was interesting to see the enthusiasm with which people spoke about their experiences” (AN). Regarding the life story of teachers,

[...] talking, learning and listening about the lives of people who studied teaching contributed to my knowledge and brought pride to me, since I was also a normalist. The research, worked in this way – creative and enjoyable – is an important learning strategy and can become the basis of knowledge in the university. (GP)

Finally, the view of this student about the semester’s work is added: “I thought that we would not have time to study so much content in one year. This work helped to learn more about education and, more importantly, the lives of known people” (PR).

In summary, it can be concluded that the research with sources on the History of Education in Paraná helped to increase knowledge about local history, enabling students to experience in practice that which, until then, had been communicated to them only theoretically. The teaching combined with research resulted in deepening and extension of relevant

content on the theme and it kept the knowledge as an open system, contributing to the improvement of teaching quality in the course.

### The contribution of the research with the use of primary sources on education in Paraná for teacher training

Of the answers obtained, it can be deduced that the activity carried out, from the students' perspective, contributed to their training as future teachers.

Let's see what the students expressed:

"Yes, the work approached the history of reality. Sometimes, history seems something distant that does not interconnect clearly to our present to our context. In this work, however, it became clear that history is the basis for our current reality" (TP).

"It is necessary for a teacher to know their history, and even to avoid making the same mistakes that others have made. It was possible to observe the difficulties that teachers faced previously or what they face today" (KS).

"Yes, because I attended all the presentations and, to perform my work, I researched on the subject and as a source, I used people who are part of my day to day life and who told me true histories [...]" (SM).

"This work helped our training because data and old experiences are stored in the memory and we can use them in our classes, telling real facts to our students" (KV).

"As a future educator, it is important for me to see how education was before and how it is today, with the help of primary sources" (LS).

Learning from the experience of teachers reported in their statements, identifying the changes that took place in school during the period, emphasising the need for the teacher to keep up to date and comparing educational paradigms through reality were also findings made by the students for carrying out the work. It was possible to understand that "action research both changes what is being researched, and it is constrained by the context and ethics of practice" (Tripp 2005, p. 3).

### Final considerations

The activities developed during the action research provided students with experience through contact with primary sources of the History of Education of Paraná, its selection, cataloging, analysis and interpretation. Questioning the sources, students found the gap between the official discourse on education and educational practice. Such reflections led us to a critical knowledge of reality, distancing them from the naive curiosity.

A broader view of the history of education, more comprehensive and more critical than that presented by the subject manuals was provided to the participants, who, in turn, identified new possibilities for work and took on different challenges. New authors, new objects and problems were experienced and assimilated by them. Transdisciplinarity is radically distinct from multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, "because the understanding of the

present world, [...] cannot be accomplished in the framework of disciplinary research” (Nicolescu 1997).

It was observed that there was student awareness with respect to the preservation of the school memories, in particular with regard to school files.

This academic production allowed future pedagogues to interact with society and dialogue with the knowledge of the unknown individuals, which brought them qualitative development expressed in their training, expanding their awareness as subjects of their own history.

History, without losing its specificity, enabled the interaction between many disciplines, contributing to a transdisciplinary perspective that was present. The studies conducted raised ethical, social, political, economic, psychological questions in their relations with the complexity of contemporary life.

Finally, the work with primary sources gave new light to local events, which, inserted into the national and regional context, began to make sense to the scholars. The organization of new action research cycles will allow the further expansion of these studies.

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