

# **Teacher continued education and school failure: problematizing the argument of incompetence**

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## **Abstract**

This article deals with the theme of teacher education, especially with continued education and its relation with the low quality of public school systems. It presents analyses from a research on the main educational programs implemented by the government of the State of São Paulo in the 1982-1994 period. Together with the documental analysis, an empirical research was carried out including a case study of one the continued education programs envisaged at the time of the implementation of the Standard School Program (1991-1994). The analyses made of the educational literature and of the educational programs reveal that teacher continued education was seen as a strategic element to build up teacher competence. The text moves on to register the presence of a discourse that has given support to the growing importance attributed to teacher continued education, projects and actions aiming at improving the quality of education systems. The discourse of incompetence is then described and problematized. The different forms assumed by this discourse are presented, according to the context in which it appears, and also the various appropriations made by the several agents involved in the teacher continued education policies, from the architects of the programs to the participating teachers. It is proposed that the argument of incompetence has founded reductionist and homogenizing practices of continued education. The importance is highlighted of taking into account, when conceiving continued education policies, the heterogeneity that characterizes the teaching staff and schools, and also of developing broader educational policies targeting the actual improvement of the educational services and not just the competence of their teachers.

## **Keywords**

Teacher education – Continued education – Ethnography – Competence.

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This article has as its purpose to discuss critically the role of teacher education, and particularly of the so-called continued education, having in mind the improvement of the quality of the public education systems in Brazil. It presents results obtained by two studies inspired in the ethnographic perspective: Patto (1990) and Souza (2001). The investigation coordinated by Patto took school failure as its object of study, and although it did not have the issue of teacher education as a focal point, the author outlines in her analysis and conclusions a proposal for teacher continued education. In our doctorate studies (Souza, 2001), we approached more directly the question of teacher education, with special emphasis on teacher continued education. We analyzed the educational programs conducted by the first three governments elected by direct vote in the State of São Paulo, i.e. those of the period between 1982 and 1994, paying particular attention to their proposals for teacher continued education; we also carried out a case study of ethnographic nature with one of the projects for teacher continued education, part of a preparation program created at the time of the implementation of the Standard School program.

Since the late 1990s the ethnographic approach has been adopted by professionals working in the field of Psychology in its interfaces with school education ((Cruz, 1987; Souza, 1991; 2001; Souza 1991; Sawaya, 1992; Freller, 2000; Souza, 2000; Pacifico, 2000; Santos, 2002; Viégas, 2002; among others). We therefore start this article by retrieving in broad lines the theoretical-methodological questions that led some psychologists towards the ethnographic perspective as an important approach to identify and analyze the heterogeneity of daily school life. Next, we focus on the study coordinated by Patto, and on its consequences for the area of continued teacher education. Part of our doctorate research is then described in the section titled “*A reflection about the issue of teacher continued education*”. We identify and

problematize the use of an argument that had been at the basis of reductionist and homogenizing conceptions and practices of teacher continued education: *the argument of incompetence*. In the closing discussion we reaffirm the significance of carrying out wider educational actions and policies with a view to improve the quality of schools, and not just the *competence* of their teachers.

### **Ethnography as a theoretical-methodological perspective to capture the school heterogeneity**

From the mid 1980s onwards the educational literature observes, not only in Brazil, but also in other countries in Latin America, the existence of some discontent among the most critical educational researchers concerning the way the school was being studied and described. Some authors emphasized the importance of rethinking the theoretical-methodological approaches adopted up to that point in educational researches<sup>1</sup>. Following a similar movement observed in the United Kingdom and United States of America at least a decade earlier, they pointed to substantial changes taking place in the way experts and researchers referred to schools<sup>2</sup>. Some advocated that we should stop following mistaken and generic explanations about schools, and about pupils and their families (Patto, 1990). Others drew attention to the need of rescuing the “school’s non-documented history”, for that is the history that makes the life at school (Ezpeleta and Rockwell, 1986). They have in common the importance attached to looking inside schools, and getting to know their agents with the purpose of

**1.** We mention, amongst others, Patto (1990) and Azanha (1990) in Brazil; Rockwell (1987) and Ezpeleta; Rockwell (1986) in Mexico; Edward, V. (1990) in Chile.

**2.** We refer here to the so-called *ethnographic, qualitative, or participant researches* represented by the works of Stubbs; Delamond (1976), Sharp; Green (1975), Hammersley; Atkison (1983), Erikson (1973; 1986), Woods (1979), and Pollard (1982), amongst others.

reaching and knowing a level of reality that had so far been neglected.

Azanha (1990), a specialist in the Philosophy of Education, calls attention to the theoretical and practical importance of the study of the concrete school practices, and criticizes what he qualifies as the *Brazilian pedagogical abstractionism*, characteristic of many studies conducted in Brazilian education until that time. To overcome pedagogical abstractionism, the author emphasizes the relevance of researchers in education turning their attention to a dimension of reality that had been virtually absent from academic concerns: the daily live at schools.

Mexican researchers Ezpeleta and Rockwell (1986), whose writings have furnished theoretical and methodological inspiration to many studies in the field of School Psychology and Education, take as a point of departure a dissatisfaction quite similar to the one described by Azanha. They also conclude for the need to pay attention to the dimension of daily life, aiming primarily at documenting its diversity<sup>3</sup>. In their work titled *Pesquisa participante* (Participant research), they question the way in which the school had been approached so far, both under positivist and liberal conceptions, and in reproductivist views, for the school reality did not occupy center stage in the theoretical production. These conceptions gave priority to the description of school's deficiencies, emphasizing 'the lack of', the 'non-existing', making use of concepts of normality and pathology, and also of predetermined categories extracted from the social sciences, such as State and Power, amongst others. Those categories followed from the analysis of other levels of social reality, imported from them to give support to the understanding of school, but failing to encompass the complexity of the processes that actually take place in the intersubjective relations in its interior. In so doing, they would end up capturing more the 'homogeneity' than the 'heterogeneity' present in the reality of

concrete daily practices. These researchers suggest approaching school reality as 'positivity', in the sense of that which exists<sup>4</sup>, that is, conducting studies that propose to describe (keeping in mind that there are no neutral descriptions) the daily school reality with its practices and concrete processes, constructed by historical agents.

In this sense, it was necessary to overcome hegemonic explanatory models to deal with schools, which either emphasized social, political, and economic determinations of the lives of individuals, or had the tendency to overvalue the psychological dimension. In other words, it was necessary to overcome both kinds of reductionism: the psychologizing and the sociologizing, implying in the construction of theoretical and methodological frameworks that could cope with the task of dealing with the school in that other, different way, taking it as the center of the theoretical effort, as a new object of study.

It is probably not a coincidence that Patto, Ezpeleta, and Rockwell have searched in the ethnographic perspective – as methodological perspective –, in Antonio Gramsci – as a theoretician of superstructures –, and in Agnes Heller's sociology of daily life, the conceptual support to carry out this task<sup>5</sup>. Such choices were at least partly due to the fact that these researchers were concerned with finding ways of understanding the educational realities of dependent capitalist countries, with similar economic and social situations.

According to Patto,

**3.** See also Rockwell (1991, 1995).

**4.** Approaching the school under this perspective will imply placing it at the center of the theoretical production, based on descriptions of particular realities put into context within the historical movement. In this sense, the concept of social reality as concrete and dialectical totality will help to understand the idea of positivity.

**5.** Unlike what happened in Britain and in the USA, where symbolic interactionism constituted the most influential theoretical framework for ethnographic studies, in Brazil and in Mexico the adoption of ethnography in educational research took place through its critical versions, that is, through the methodological perspective called 'critical ethnography' (see also Rockwell, 1991).

[...] because it was focused on the relations between the common life of ordinary men, and on the movements of history, and for not losing sight of the specificity of people involved in the actions that weave the daily life, her [i.e. Agnes Heller's] work is particularly promising as theoretical framework for the reflection about the schooling of the lower classes of Third World capitalist countries, conceived as a historical process weaved by all those who meet in each school unit. (1990, p. 133, our emphasis)

It was after the recovery of the subjective dimension upon new bases that a step was taken to overcome not just psychologism, but also sociologism. The texts of Ezpeleta and Rockwell are especially relevant in this theoretical construction, and promising in their manner of conceiving the origin of the heterogeneity (observed in ethnographic studies with teachers, students, and parents) found both among school units, and among their agents. At the root of this theoretical reflection is the concept of *undocumented history*:

The school has a documented history, usually written by the State power, which emphasizes its homogeneous existence. (...) There is, however, another history and existence, undocumented, that coexists with this history and existence, and through which the school gains material form, comes to life. In this history the State determination and presence intermingle with civil determinations and presence of various characteristics. The documented homogeneity splits into manifold daily life realities. In this undocumented history, in this daily life dimension, workers, pupils and parents incorporate the State directions, and build the school. (1989, p. 12-13)

Indeed, all those that give life to the school reinterpret, resignify as social agents the

rules, regulations, political and pedagogical projects that appear, for instance, in the educational policies that the State intends to implement. Thus, the construction of each school, albeit immersed in a wider social movement, is always a local and particular version in this movement. School practice, built by all those people that give existence to its daily life, is neither coherent nor homogeneous. The school is a live social formation; it is accumulated history. Inside the schools authoritarian, democratic, 'modern' and technocratic conceptions and practices coexist. Each school has a history, or histories; at times fragmented and contradictory. Teachers have singular personal and professional lives, which combined with the variety of local communities histories result in heterogeneous, rather than homogeneous, school practices. In this sense, we reiterate here what has been pointed out for years by researchers in the area of teacher education: that the policies of continued teacher education proposed by the State or by universities need to take into account the perspective of the school agents, because it is through it that the fabric of school education is woven.

### **A study about school failure and its unfolding for the area of teacher continued education**

In this section we recover the already classic study by Patto (1991). Her work presents a detailed analytical description of daily life at a public school. Investigating the causes of school failure, Patto analyzes the school practices and processes from the perspective of the subjects: teachers, parents, and pupils. Just as conceived by Heller (1972; 1987), this subject is the carrier of a life history, of a worldview, and of a praxis that cannot be understood solely within the sphere of the concepts of dominant ideology and class relations.

In the first part of the study, she traces the origins of the conceptions that shape and reshape the social prejudices and stereotypes that permeate the beliefs about the social, cul-

tural, cognitive, and even moral inferiority of the members of the popular classes that appear in social life, and also in part in the academic discourse. The history of the explanations of the school failure is then recovered by the analysis of the studies and researches published since the early decades of the 20th century. In the second part, the analysis of the fieldwork is presented.

The prolonged contact of pupils and teachers from two school classes with the technical team, the conduction of formal and informal interviews with the families, as well as the conduction of case studies with four multi-repeater pupils gave the author elements to go beyond traditional explanations for school failure. The latter are largely based on prejudices and social stereotypes, and on a *medicalized* and psychologizing view that situates in the pupils and their families the reasons for their school and social failure. Her work revealed the existence of school practices and processes – observed within the school and within the education system – which by themselves could explain many of the schooling problems observed. Some of them are: the practice of streaming, encouraging the stigmatization of groups of pupils labeled as weak, and inducing the creation of self-fulfilling prophecies; the practice of 'remanejamento' (that is, to move pupils from one group to another – sometimes more than once – during the academic year), performed without previous notice to the pupil or the family, resulting in the fact that some children may end up having many teachers in a single year; the disregard behind the common habit of reprimanding or humiliating a child in public, undermining their self-image still under formation; the practice of forcing the pupils to do meaningless and tedious activities in learning support groups.

The author refers also to other school practices and processes that are related with the learning problems observed at school, such as the negative expectations of the performance of pupils from popular classes; presence of

stereotypes and social prejudices against the poor, blacks, and Northeasters; perverse mechanisms of allocating teachers to classes, apart from the bureaucratization and segmentation of the pedagogical work, which relegates teachers to execute imposed pedagogical proposals, in whose conception they took no part. In this sense, they also suffer the same process of disregard as subjects endowed with a personal and professional history through which their teaching practice assumes sense and meaning.

Based on the sociology of everyday life, proposed by Agnes Heller, Patto reaffirms that the school reproduces the conditions observed in the society at large: the segmentation and bureaucratization of the pedagogical work. Those features of the education system engender the conditions that facilitate the teacher's adhesion to particularities, to the development of attitudes and practices motivated, above all, by particular interests, not the children's. The analysis of the classroom practices and of the case studies with four pupils revealed the insubordination, at times veiled, of teachers and pupils to the school rules, which was understood as a sign of resistance against authoritarian and meaningless school practices. However, the insubordination of teachers and pupils does not necessarily work on their behalf: pupils end up being regarded as undisciplined or 'immature', and the insubordination of a teacher can be interpreted as a sign of lack of commitment, and professional incompetence. At the end of her work, Patto takes on this question again and alerts to the mistake of attributing the cause of school inefficiency to a certain teacher profile, considered as uncommitted and incompetent.

It is a mistake of serious repercussions to try to argue that the cause for the inefficiency of school is the profile of the educator, a profile drawn from moralistic considerations, all too common among technocrats, that educators 'are

incompetent', and 'do not care at all'. The testimonies of the educators have helped to show that their reactions find their reasons in the logic of the system that induces them to use legislation in their own benefit, thereby constituting genuine 'survival strategies' under adverse work conditions." (p. 344)

Patto's conclusions may be somewhat disheartening, especially for those who seek well-defined alternatives of intervention in the public school. However, the aim of her work was never that of offering solutions, but of developing a critical review of the explanations traditionally given for school failure.

In the last pages of her work, Patto discusses an issue that has direct implications to school practice: teacher continued education, and its transforming potential for school relations. She understands that educators in general, and female educators in particular, "carry radical unfulfilled needs that make them, from the perspective of the sociology of daily life, a potentially transforming social group" (1990, p. 349). She then outlines a proposal of sustained work with teachers to be developed *at the schools, with voluntary participation in small groups* coordinated by a 'qualified professional' who should not be concerned with transmitting theories to improve teachers' technical preparation, but who is capable of a certain type of listening and interlocution.

Given the need broadly manifested by educators of a real interlocutor, and given the complex nature of the interlocution necessary to allow the transformation of the conceptual scheme that supports action, the question remains of how to define the nature of this 'qualified interlocutor' who will work together with groups of educators to overcome the unreflected, stereotyped, prejudiced, pragmatic way, destitute of human-generic perspective, in which they carry out the

work of teaching. In very general terms, we would say that such professional must be capable of a critically informed listening take takes into account the fantasies, sufferings, and defenses attendant to any process of change. (1990, p. 352)

### **A reflection about the issue of teachers' continued education**

For some years now, a growing trend has been observed in the educational scenery of offering continued education courses to teachers<sup>6</sup>. This trend can be observed in the establishment of several agreements between municipal and state Secretariats for Education and public and private universities with the objective of conducting programs of continued teacher education in the shape of courses (of different durations), seminars, meetings, conferences, and similar events. In addition to these cooperation agreements, the Secretariats themselves have, through their central and intermediate bodies, taken up the task of 'preparing', 'recycling', and 'improving the competence' of school workers, including teachers, principals, coordinators, and supervisors.

In the State of São Paulo, for example, a large program was concluded in 2003 with the aim of giving higher education degree to teachers of the state school system, in order to comply with the new legal requirements (PEC – University Education). This program was carried out under an agreement set up between the State Secretariat for Education and three universities: USP, UNESP, and PUC-SP. In this program alone, 6,300 teachers concluded their courses. In its second edition (PEC – Municipalities), recently concluded, approximately 2,000 teachers from the public school systems of ten municipalities of the State of São Paulo completed the program.

<sup>6</sup>. The expressions in-service training, continued training, and permanent training are also employed.

To give an idea of the scale of the actions, proposals, and references to the theme, we have carried out a survey on the Internet, and we have found no fewer than 2,620,000 hits for the phrase '*formação de professores*' (teacher education) and 543,000 for the phrase '*formação contínua de professores*' (teacher continued education)! Even a cursory examination of the hits found indicates that this is an area in clear expansion, and also extremely lucrative.

This trend had already been pointed out by some authors (André, 1997; Perosa, 1997; Sarti, 1999; Souza, 2001, amongst others). It is worth noting that, despite the significant number of actions developed, the academic community has paid little attention to the issue, especially with reference to critical research studies that deal with the objectives, presuppositions, contents, and strategies of this modality of teacher education.

We intend to contribute to the development of this field of study by offering a detailed critical analysis of the main educational programs carried out by the Secretariat for Education of the State of São Paulo addressed to primary education between 1982 and 1994, particularly their proposals for teacher continued education<sup>7</sup>. Alongside the documental analysis, we conducted an empirical research inspired in the ethnographic approach<sup>8</sup>. It consisted of a case study in one of the projects of teacher continued education, part of the Preparation Program conceived to help implementing the Quality School<sup>9</sup>.

Our analyses of the educational literature and of the educational program implemented during that period indicate that teacher continued education was examined, both in education policies (through the programs implemented) and by the literature on teacher education, as a strategic element to develop the *competence of the teacher*.

We thus identified the existence of an argument that has been used to give support to the growing importance attributed to the area

of teacher continuing education within a wider project of improving the quality of the school. We have called it the 'argument of incompetence', and it centers on the idea that the chief reason for the poor quality of the education system is precisely the incompetence of the teachers. As a consequence of their poor initial formation, teachers would not know how to deal with the diversity of students attending schools today, particularly of students from the popular classes. Consequently, and following this line of reasoning, the sole or principal action to be pursued to improve the quality of the education system is the improvement of teachers' competence.

The concern with the competence (or incompetence) of teachers is not new. But the use of the concept of competence, and particularly of 'technical competence', received great impetus with the publication in 1982 of Guiomar Namó de Mello's book "Primary School teachers: from technical competence to political commitment"<sup>10</sup>. The analysis then developed arose intense debate in academic circles involving two concepts related to the teaching work, and to the way in which teacher were (and to some extent still is) seen by academia, by the media, and by itself: technical competence and political commitment<sup>11</sup>. Her work inspired others, and in the whole they have, albeit unintentionally, contributed to erect an essentially negative view about the teachers. Perhaps more importantly than negative, a *homogeneous view* about the teachers and their teaching practice, considered as technically incompetent and politically uncommitted. That is the heyday of the discourse of teachers' technical incompetence

**7.** This research was carried out within our doctoral studies (Souza, 2001).

**8.** The analysis included the official documents of the educational programs implemented in the States of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Minas Gerais, with special attention to São Paulo - Basic Cycle (CB), Basic Cycle in a Single Shift (CB-JU) and Quality School (EP).

**9.** Program implemented in 1991.

**10.** In 2004 the book was in its 12th reprinting, giving us an indication as to how its ideas were, and still are, disseminated.

**11.** More details can be found in (Cury, 1982); (Saviani, 1983); (Nosella, 1983); (Lenhard, 1983) and (Gadotti, 1983).

and of the simplistic idea, pushed forward in the following years by the hegemonic academic discourse and by the educational policies, that “if we have a low-quality school it is *because* teachers are incompetent”<sup>12</sup>. This line of reasoning showed a way out to overcome school failure and thereby improve the quality of public school: to offer continued education courses to teachers with a view to remedy the deficiencies of their initial training. Now the children and their families were no longer the incompetent culprits, but the teachers. Drawing an analogy, the courses of continued education played a compensatory role, similar to the one played by the old programs of compensatory education addressed to pre-school children in the 1970s.

We understand that the concept of *competence* gained popularity both within the academia and in all levels of the school system at the same time that the explanations of the learning difficulties of the pupils from the popular classes started to shift from the students and their families to the school institution. In other words, as the traditional explanations for the school failure based on the Cultural Deprivation Theory started to be criticized, the school, the teachers and their pedagogical practice came back to the scene, gaining visibility, especially the teacher<sup>13</sup>. On several occasions, simplistic analyses identified the teachers as the responsible for the serious problems observed at schools.

In the development of our thesis, we demonstrated the presence of this argument of incompetence in the documents of the educational programs, in several significant works of educational research, and in the representations and actions of agents involved in the three levels of the Secretariat for Education: central, intermediate, and local (central team, monitors, and teachers, respectively).

We note that the “argument of incompetence” takes on different forms according to the context in which it appears: it tends to be more refined at the level of the

educational literature, and rather simplistic in the education policies. In its appropriation by the educational policies and their corresponding actions of in-service training, the argument has focused *more attention on the teachers, and less on the schools and education system*. The people defining educational policies and creating educational programs seem to borrow from the universe of academic literature only the more convenient ideas and analyses, those that will be politically more advantageous to them, typically those that will help developing actions of greater visibility for the general public, thereby bringing greater benefit to the current government. The academic debate is simplified, being replaced by particular, more practical and prescriptive, forms. And these signaled with the idea of investing in programs of teacher continued education as a ‘medicine for all school maladies, instead of defining and implementing educational policies and proposals of continued education with the objective of improving the general working conditions at schools.

The discourse assumes slightly different versions after being incorporated by educational agents working at the three different levels of the Secretariat for Education. The central team, mentors of the project analyzed here, were, from the three groups interviewed, the most seduced by the *argument of incompetence*. As a group, the team was convinced that the main cause of the low quality of public education was the incompetence of their teachers. In an effort of self-criticism, the team questioned the efficacy of the activities of continued education formerly conducted by the Secretariat for Education, in which several members of the same team were directly involved. However, the commitment to the argument of incompetence

**12.** See Souza (2001), particularly sections 2.4 “The debate about competence” and 3.2 “The Revista Brasileira de Estudos Pedagógicos – RBEP”.

**13.** We say that the teacher came back to the scene because during the 1940s, under the influence of the New School movement, the school and the teachers were severely criticized for their incapacity to offer good and interesting teaching. See (Cardoso, 1949).



was noticeable in many of their speeches. When referring to the Quality School, a program that was then being implemented, the manager of the team says:

“In the beginning (of the proposal of the Quality School) it was like this: 30 pupils per classroom, three shifts, laboratories ... forgetting that the teachers that are there at the schools are not trained to work with labs. It is a symbol, a fetish. It is there but nobody knows how to use it (...). But it is a symbol, something the population find charming, they focus on material conditions as if they would solve the problem, as if having well-equipped installations in a school would improve the teaching of science. There is always moments when the discourses answer to the expectations that are, in my view, wrong ones. The smaller thing, that thing that gives less political dividends, which is to respect the pupils’ hypotheses (on their process of learning), to understand that the pupil is a person, that one has to give them some room, that is not a political banner. (Mary, team manager)

The ‘*argument of incompetence*’ works for the central team as the academic ratification for their idea of ‘*creating a network of competence*’, that is, to increase the number of teachers that are convinced that to improve the quality of education it is *necessary and sufficient* to adopt new teaching methods and techniques.

The group of monitors, on the other hand, displayed the best conditions to overcome the discourse. The course monitors interviewed agree with the central team’s strategy of ‘*creating a network of competence*’. They accepted their share of responsibility in this task, as they had previously done with their own professional development. Their testimony revealed that the course monitors had to invest their free time, energy and private resources to

acquire the status of ‘competent teachers’. Their experience in a previous project allowed them to identify essential elements of a successful program of teacher continued education: long-run course, follow-up activities, and a challenging and supportive reference group<sup>14</sup>.

That opportunity, as it was experienced by the four course monitors interviewed, engendered a conception of professional development that goes beyond the model proposed by the ‘*argument of incompetence*’. They realized that teacher professional development involves more than changing behaviors, adopting new methodologies and using innovative techniques. Professional growth is closely linked with the way teachers develop as individuals and as professionals. Therefore, the course monitors were more conscious than either of the two other groups that any process of change brings with it uncomfortable feelings of anxiety, resistance, loss and uncertainty. Those feelings need to be accepted, understood and, particularly, dealt with. We believe that the course monitors would have paid more attention to these aspects if they had been provided with the required support and supervision by the central team, responsible for their training.

Teachers were the group most severely affected by the perverse logic of concealment of the educational reality underlying the *argument of incompetence*.

In our interviews with the teachers we had as our main purpose to collect opinions about the course they were attending at that moment, as well as their ideas about professional development. But those willing to actually listen to the teachers must be prepared to get in touch with their pains, doubts and, especially, complaints about the exercise of a professional practice full of challenges faced mostly in isolation. Nearly all teachers took the interview as an opportunity to protest, let off steam, and share some of their professional

**14.** This was the ‘Literacy without failure’ project, coordinated by Telma

history. So, when talking about their work and about the course they were taking, the teachers' discourse was sometimes erratic, with frequent changes of subject. Manifestations of dissatisfaction with the working conditions offered by the schools were present in various degrees and manners in the group.

When questioned about the course, several teachers commented about their relationship with colleagues and superiors, about problems with pupils, about uncertainties and insecurities towards their teaching careers. A frequent complaint was about the *solitude* of their work as educators. Indeed, we understand that the questions raised by the group are directly related to their current teaching conditions and to the concrete possibilities for professional development. Reflecting about the issue of continued education unveils the specific teaching conditions of each one of them, with their real students and concrete problems. Professional development was not regarded as *an abstract idea*, but referred to the concrete conditions in which the teaching practice took place.

The discourse of erratic style, with comings and goings around various themes, which could be noticed in some of the teachers, can also reveal how some teachers feel about the challenges of their teaching practice, and about the inexpressive place occupied by activities of continued education in their lives. The professional routine under inadequate conditions leaves little room for activities of reflection, study, and self-organization.

When they decide to take a course, some of the teachers are in search of immediate answers. Rita is one of these professionals. After eleven years in teaching, she had never been responsible for a literacy class. But that year she was put in charge of a particularly difficult class of the Basic Cycle (CB), where pupils had a painful school history, having failed quite a few times. There was great anxiety in her speech, hurried, with no preambles, as if she had wanted to talk to someone for a long time.

"I started doing the course because I was working with a CB group and I've never worked with CB. I have eleven years of experience teaching all kinds of group except literacy. So I started the course because of that. I was working with a very problematic group. (...) They were on the 'A, E, I, O, U' (meaning the earliest phases of the process). (...) So I was asking for help. I was really desperate! I could only cry, and I cried and cried. I did not know how to resolve that situation. Then I heard about the course, and I expected a miracle, you know. I went there on that hope... (Rita)

The interviews with the group of teachers revealed, however, the 'heterogeneity' that characterized it. We noticed how diverse the motivations of a teacher can be in attending a course of continued education: he may be 'desperate' for immediate solutions or in search of knowledge to reflect upon his practice, or still, he may feel under pressure, either from internal factors, or from his superiors.

The diversity within the group of teachers could also be felt in their perceptions about the reasons why the FDE was offering the course, and we were surprised to learn that many of them had never thought about that. As they began to think about it, the *argument of incompetence* emerged, in the same form as it appeared in the version of the educational policies; other teachers, however, showed to be critical about the actions of professional development carried out by the FDE, behind which they sensed 'hidden intentions'. It is important to note that the critical stance of the teachers could lead to two different reactions, one of them being the refusal to take part in the activities proposed, and the other being the opposite, of engaging in the activities trying to make the most out of the opportunities that were being given to them.

Each teacher is different, they have different histories, distinct conceptions about continued education, about teaching, about their

possibilities for growth, and those of their pupils, and finally, they incorporate in their own personal way the educational literature they come in touch with, just as the determinations and guidance of the educational programs to which they are submitted. Schools are also heterogeneous, as are their needs, features, clientele, and teaching staff. A proposal of professional development must take these elements into account, and the heterogeneity that characterizes the daily life of our schools.

The teachers were the group that most suffered the negative effects of the *argument of incompetence*. In an environment where the quality of the education system and the competence of their professionals, particularly the teacher, have been systematically criticized, it has been very hard for all to keep teaching, particularly for those that despite the insufficient conditions of work take their duties seriously. The dissemination of the idea of the incompetence of the teachers as a result of their poor initial education, ratified by the mainstream educational literature and assimilated by the educational policies, reached the schoolteacher. They were ready to accept that argument, as long as the incompetence was the incompetence of 'the other'. The school, without an environment provided by a supportive school team, makes it more difficult for the teacher to discharge their responsibility to deal with the difficulties inherent to the work with their pupils. The problems are experienced as *individual problems* that require individual actions. Those teachers that cannot cope with their own classroom problems are labeled as incompetent.

And so, we were faced with a powerful defense mechanism: the projection<sup>15</sup>, employed whenever the integrity of the self is threatened. The stressing work conditions teachers usually have, plus a rationale that identifies the teacher as the 'guilty party' favors the use of the projection to safeguard their self-image as 'good' and 'competent' teachers. However, by projecting the incompetence onto the *other* teacher, the teacher may feel also 'emptied'. The

assurance of being 'competent', as the whole incompetence was projected onto the other may not last long as another difficult situation will probably occur shortly. We understand that by projecting their own difficulties (felt as signs of incompetence) onto the other, the teacher *also* loses (or sees reduced) her self-reliance. In other words: as the teachers cannot see (and experience) the limitations and problems of their teaching practice, they do not exercise their capacity of reflection, self-knowledge and self-re-creation; they do not exercise their capacity to overcome their own limits. The pessimism and hopelessness one finds when talking with some teachers may be related to this 'emptying' we are referring to here.

As pointed out in the literature, teachers need interlocutors, someone they can share their concerns and experiences with (Andaló, 1989; Patto, 1990; Souza, 1991; amongst others); interlocutors who are not easily found among their peers, in the current teaching situation.

In summary, the *argument of incompetence* has offered the basis to place the blame on the teachers for the low performance of the education system, thereby weakening the already difficult relations among them. The interviews conducted during our study have brought evidence that teachers generally try to safeguard their image of competence, both to themselves and to us. They attempted to do that by distinguishing themselves from the 'mass of teachers' and by attributing the 'incompetence' to 'the others'. To our view, it is a psychological strategy of survival, which prevents them from identifying with the teachers they accuse of incompetence and lack of commitment.

## Final discussion

At the beginning of this article we proposed to problematize the role of teacher

**15.** We use the concept of projection in its psychoanalytical sense: "The projection always emerges as a defense, as attribution to the other – person or thing – of qualities, feelings, and desires that the individual does not recognize, or refuses, in him/herself" (Laplanche, J.; Pontalis, J. B., 1985, p. 481).

continued education within a project of improvement of the quality of teaching. We saw how teacher education has taken a prominent place and, paraphrasing Arroyo (1996), 'a strategy to solve all school maladies'.

In addition, our analyses have indicated that the recent proposals of continued teacher education developed by the Secretariat for Education have been concerned with teachers individually and in isolation from their work context, considering them as poorly qualified professionals in need of better training. The schools, their social and institutional contexts, as well as their concrete individual teaching conditions, have not been considered as important elements that provide the fabric to the process of change expected of teachers.

A project for the improvement of the quality of teaching cannot succeed based solely on continued teacher education policies. This is a mistaken strategy that reduces and simplifies the understanding of the work at schools. Several authors have warned against disregarding or underestimating the importance of the concrete conditions of work under which teachers carry on their practice in concrete schools, and therefore subjected to varied conditions. These authors have also proposed that we pay attention to the complex interpersonal relations that give concrete existence to the school in terms of reproduction, contradiction, conflict, or social transformation. Moreover, they draw attention to the significance of knowing more about the school culture and teacher culture, and also of challenging the bureaucracy and administrative hurdles, as well as of rethinking the initial education, teacher career and the wage policies<sup>16</sup>.

As put by Azanha,

The very idea of school autonomy, which stimulates the development of pedagogical projects specific to it, presupposes that the entity to be improved is the school and not the teacher. The latter should receive attention as a participant of a school project. Other than that, the individual

improvement of a teacher is a personal matter for which the educational Administration can and must create facilitating conditions, *but not turn it into a public problem. The public problem is in the school.*" (1990, pp. 54, our stress)

In brief, the focus of attention of the educational policies should be 'the school and' not just the teacher. The low quality of school education is neither a technical problem, nor it is the case of finding new teaching theories or techniques and *transmitting* them to the teachers. As qualified professionals, teachers have the right and the duty of developing continually; however, as argued by Azanha (1990), teacher education must be inserted in a school project. Thus, it is urgent to rethink the strategies and approaches commonly used in proposals of teacher in-service training, especially those offered by the public school systems.

Studies in this area have already criticized extensively the classical approaches of continued education under the formats of short courses, seminars, conferences, brief experiences and similar events. Evaluations have shown how limited are the impacts of such activities to the quality of teaching.

Offering an alternative to the more traditional approaches, researches and reflections have emerged with the aim of constructing a new conception of continued education. In an article that attempts to examine these new approaches, Candau (1996) identifies three theses that synthesize the main lines of research.

1. The process of continued education must have as its fundamental reference the knowledge of the teacher, its recognition and appreciation. What knowledges do teachers have? What kind of relation these knowledges

**16.** We refer here to the works of Patto (1990), André; Fazenda (1991), Bueno; Catani; Souza (1998), Franco (1995), Arroyo (1996), Andaló (1989), Azanha (1994), Sawaya, (2002), Souza; Tanamachi; Rocha (2002), amongst others.

have with the so-called sciences of education? This is little explored, emerging field of research.

2. The proposals of continued education must take into account the life cycle and the stage of professional development of the teachers. This is because the questions, doubts and needs are heterogeneous, depending on the stage of the career the teacher is in.

3. The school must be taken as the privileged locus for continued teacher education. The programs of teacher education should be structured around action problems and projects, and not necessarily around academic contents. They recognize the importance of creating spaces and times at the school that favor collective processes of reflection and intervention on the concrete teaching practice. There is emphasis on the need to rethink the work of supervision and coordination.

We understand that these new trends in the research about continued teacher education represent considerable progress, especially if they include the concern with the articulation of the knowledge produced in each one of them individually. That is an important, challenging process, still under construction. Candau offers, nevertheless, some relevant questions, and one of them points to the presence of

[...] a movement of return to a kind of analysis of the issues of teacher education almost without any reference to the wider social, cultural, political and ideological contexts in which they are situated. (1996, p. 151)

In this sense, Azanha's considerations help us to set the compass of our reflection and action about the theme of the professional development of teachers.

The entity to be the object of action in a policy to improve the quality of teaching is the school. And no one argues that a development policy that reached every teacher would succeed in improving the quality of teaching. A school is not just a collection of teachers. A school is a social entity that is not just the simple gathering of individuals with different roles. (...) The issue of the quality of teaching is, therefore, an institutional issue. It is the schools that need to be improved. Without this institutional effort, the isolated improvement of the teachers offers no guarantee that it will meet in practice with favorable conditions for a better teaching. (1990, p. 52)

In conclusion, we believe, still, that the improvement of the quality of teaching could be helped by researches that supplied elements for the definition of more inclusive educational policies, whose measures would favor the implementation of actions capable of coping with the various aspects mentioned above: the concrete working conditions at schools, the personal interrelationships among the various school agents, school culture and teacher culture, management of the school systems and teacher education, to mention some of the more central aspects.

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