

Curricular Changes in Teacher Education: A View of Comparative Research in Three Contexts

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Abstract

This work is part of a project whose objective was to study curricular changes in teacher training programs from a comparative approach. We studied the curriculum of three universities (Harvard, University of Minho and UFTM) from 3 different countries (United States, Portugal and Brazil) in the last two decades. To achieve our goals, in addition to literature review and document analysis, we visited the universities, made observations, and interviewed teachers and students. We used content analysis and comparative education methodologies to analyze data. Results highlighted that practice-centered programs prevails in American education; that a praxis focused approach is emphasized in Portugal; and that there is a pursuit of a historical-critical guidance in Brazil (mainly revealed in teachers' discourses) with strong multicultural trend in current curricular policies. Our findings helped us to understand how those three universities make links between theory and practice in the training of their teachers, and drew attention to HTF (Harvard Teachers Fellows Program) for its school practice immersion since the very beginning of the program. Studying those experiences from a comparative point of view can help curriculum planners, higher education managers and policy makers devoted to the field of teacher education to develop courses/programs that are neither excessively pragmatic, nor idealized and detached from school routine. The project was funded by CNPq.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Curriculum, Educational Policy, Higher Education.

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Introduction

This paper is part of a project whose objective was to study curricular changes in teacher training programs from a comparative approach. Our focus was on the training of teachers for the specific contents of Basic Education (chemistry, biology, history, etc.). We studied the curriculum of three universities in the last 20 years: University of Minho in Portugal, Federal University of Triangulo Mineiro (UFTM) in Brazil, and Harvard in the United States.

The choice of those universities is not fortuitous. Harvard University is known worldwide for both the important contributions it has made to the advancement of scientific knowledge and the education of leaders, and the prospective look it always represents. For the purposes of this project, Harvard is also important for the regular processes of curricular changes it performs. Challenging programs such as the Teacher Education Program (TEP) were also reasons to have Harvard as one of the first choices in a study of the nature of the one proposed here.

Universities in Portugal had to undergo a series of changes resulting from the implementation of Bologna Process. In addition, the country maintains important historical ties with Brazil, including the language, which could be very important to identify possible transfers from the Bologna process philosophy to Brazilian universities. University of Minho studied these changes, building important critical references that, in addition to curriculum studies carried out there, offered significant contributions to this project.

UFTM, in 2007, started a process to create six licensures, whose pedagogical projects were based on the idea of a general and humanistic education cycle, followed by three years of specialization. These courses were created within the framework of a very specific public policy for federal public institutions, REUNI (Program to Support Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities), which has been the object of strong criticism from researchers of higher education, as well as teachers and students.

Literature review involved texts about curriculum, educational reform, teacher education, comparative research, educational policy and history of education in the three countries we analyzed. In addition to literature review and document analysis, we visited the universities, made observations, interviewed teachers and students. We used content analysis (Bardin, 2008) and comparative education methodologies (Bray, M.; Adamson, B. & Mason, M., 2007; Manzon, 2008) to analyze data.

Our study was divided into four phases: a detailed analysis of each institution, accompanied by a corresponding bibliographic survey (a case study about teacher education in each institution / country), and a final phase of comparative analysis of teacher education policies and their impact on the three institutions / countries analyzed.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this part, we analyze the three universities separately and after make a short synthesis of the main findings of our project.

UNIVERSITY OF MINHO – PORTUGAL

The University of Minho (perhaps, all Portuguese universities) seek the integration between theoretical studies and pedagogical practice, in particular during the curricular internship of the masters' degree. Currently it takes only 6 months, and culminates in the elaboration of a final paper (thesis). After changes resulting from adjustments to Bologna Process, the internship consists mainly in observation of other teacher's practice. Trainees should focus on one aspect of the observed practice, which may include the suggestion and implementation of a project, and write about it based on the theory studied during the course. The paper is presented to an examination board at the end of the course.

It is important to remember that within the European Space of Higher Education, students graduate in a field of knowledge (3 years) and then, the training for teaching occurs only in masters' degree. It lasts 2 years and the internship takes place in the second year of the program. As the contact with the practice was reduced (internship used to last a whole year), professors affirmed in their interviews that they try to make a movement to articulate theory-practice-theory (the idea of *praxis*) all the time during their disciplines.

Those disciplines may vary, depending on each master's degree in teaching, but, in general, they are focused on teaching and teaching of specific contents (mathematics, history, chemistry, etc.); Curriculum and assessment; Developmental psychology; School as an organization; Educational technologies; Special education, and, more rarely, on disciplines of humanities (ethics, sociology, pedagogical thinking, etc.).

Our interviewees mentioned theoretical bases of Piaget and the principles of reflective thinking, reflective teacher (for example, Antonio Novoa) to inform their teacher education projects. Consequently, the idea of integration between theory and practice (and more specifically, the idea of *praxis*) should be fundamental in their teaching programs.

The curriculum of the undergraduate and masters courses are proposed by the Ministry of Education, generally in a centralized way, with some margin for autonomy, so universities can choose a few disciplines to compose their curriculum (for example, electives, etc.). According to our interviewees, opening or closing of courses are directly related to the employability of students, and the university has the autonomy to do so.

FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF TRIANGULO MINEIRO – UFTM – BRAZIL

In the Brazilian case study, we highlighted the experience of UFTM (Federal University of Triângulo Mineiro). Its licensure courses were created within REUNI, a federal project to increase the number of courses and institutions of higher education in the country, especially outside the main economic centers.

In Brazil, different from the other countries, teacher education is offered in undergraduate level (4 years course), in a licensure course that is offered along with the bachelor's degree. Students usually have a group of contents in the specific area of their choice (physics, geography, languages and literature, etc), disciplines related to

teaching of these contents and disciplines related to the field of education and humanities (sociology, sociology of education, psychology, history of education, didactics, politics of education, etc). There are a few mandatory components (Brazilian sign language, internship, and others that vary, depending on government decisions), and some established amount of hours for certain groups of components, but universities have flexibility to choose the disciplines to offer.

Those courses of UFTM had special characteristics. One of them was the attempt to implant a one year *Common Cycle*, with emphasis on a humanistic, interdisciplinary education, without initial division between courses. This project presented, according to their pedagogical projects, proposals inspired by international experiences.

After less than 6 years of the beginning of this proposal, Common Cycle was extinguished and each course followed its way, in a very traditional manner. According to our interviewees, UFTM was not able to accomplish neither the attempt of a humanistic and interdisciplinary education nor a better association between theory and practice during the courses.

The same problem is common in other undergraduate courses of the country (Pachane & Domiciano, 2012). Except for some specific successful experiences conducted by one or another teacher individually, a national program called PIBID (Institutional Program for Teaching Initiation) has been highlighted as the privileged space that facilitates effective articulation between theory and practice in the education of future teachers.

In general, teacher education courses in Brazil are more theoretical, with emphasis on the basic areas and research, with a historical separation between theory and practice. Those problems were mentioned not only by our interviewees but also in the literature about the theme.

There are different sources of theory influences in Brazilian education, from multicultural to traditional technocratic approaches, both in policies and practices. The discourses of teachers, students and in curricular documents, for example the pedagogical projects of courses, socio-historical approach frequently appears. Dermeval Saviani is one intellectual of education that is mentioned a lot, as a reference in the field, as well as Paulo Freire. Their conceptions are considered as a kind of ideal to be followed, but in the daily life of students, they mentioned to feel a more traditional and conservative practice in the classrooms.

Brazilian educational policies are now passing through a series of changes and the future of teacher education, as well as the future of education, is still very unclear for us. As examples, we can mention the fact that High School curriculum changed recently and those changes were object of strong criticism from entirely society. Parameters for teacher training are about to change too. There are projects of law prohibiting the discussion of themes like religion education or sexual education at school. The study of humanities, ethnical themes and social matters in general is about to be abolished in Basic Education. There are proposals of laws to arrest teachers who express opinions considered ideological or tendentious (especially in political terms) in the classroom. Thus, in this context, the orientation of education and teachers' education is still not clear for us.

HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION - HARVARD UNIVERSITY – USA

We can consider American experiences as a counterpoint to the densely theoretical models of teacher training programs we have studied up to here. They are strongly dedicated to practice, to classroom daily matters and to the solution of the quotidian problems of the school and its surroundings. For this reason, they are considered among the most pragmatic models of teacher training and analyzers identify connections with ideas of John Dewey in American Educational Programs.

In the US, different levels of teacher shortage cause different levels of requirement for admission into the teaching profession in each state, and as consequence, the existence of a wide diversity of training programs. From distance education in short term courses to doctorate level programs, USA live with the need to administrate a very complex system, where the most important pre-requisite for becoming a teacher is passing an examination.

This license is valid for a period of 5 years and needs to be renewed. Some categories can have only his first initial license, which can be renewed for another 5 years. Others can have the professional license. Usually the license obtained in one state is valid in a group of others, but there is no national license.

The state of Massachusetts has programs at various levels, from Teach for America, which practically works with lay teachers, to postgraduate programs. Harvard has undergraduate training programs (UTEP) and two graduate (TEP and HTF) degrees. Teacher training at Harvard is closer to projects such as PIBID than to regular undergraduate programs in Brazil. This openness to adjustment makes it possible for curricula to be changed at any time when necessary, being attentive not only to legislation and the training needs of students, but also to the local needs of states and schools.

The Undergraduate Teacher Education Program (UTEP, available electronically at <http://utep.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do>) is held at the college in its final years, and is considered as a pre-graduation. The HTF (Harvard Teacher Fellow - <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/htf>) is the university's latest program and may replace the Teacher Education Program (TEP, <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/masters/tep>).

In this program, the hours of courses are not taken by subjects (generally 4 or 5), and the programs are relatively short (1 year or 1 year and a half). The emphasis is on the teaching methodology of a specific subject, which is somewhat similar to what we observe in Europe. There are courses in mathematics, social studies/history, English and science. They are very attentive to issues of multiculturalism and the psychological characteristics of adolescence, focusing on classroom conflicts, schools' relationship with the community, students' interests and needs.

When we conducted this research, HTF was about to start. The program was planned to begin with a spring semester course and monitored teaching at the Cambridge Harvard Summer Academy (CHSA) at the end of college last semester. Participants then have a further academic year of internship at partner schools across the country. In this period, they have reduced working hours in order to continue their studies and

additional training sessions offered by faculty. Such moments are online courses or videoconferencing meetings. Students then return to campus to complete the program with one more course and another monitored teaching period at CHSA in the following summer. At the end of this period, they may receive their initial teaching license, provided if they pass the required examinations.

Anyone who wishes can stay and have more disciplines, qualifying for the master's degree at the end of the following summer. Those who integrate full-time teaching (preferably in the same school where they did the internship) will continue to receive orientation and distance training for the first two years of their careers.

Summing it up, students perform the oriented practice from the first semester of their training, concomitantly to the disciplines. Then, they stay another year and a half on the program (one of which working in a public school), and continue to receive support from teachers for 2 years after the program ends. As an incentive, HTF is fee free, students receive a salary for their work as teachers and with the accomplishment of another 2 or 3 disciplines (only these are paid), they receive the master's degree.

It is important to note that in the US there is no expectation that students will teach for the rest of their lives. Teaching is generally understood as a moment in one's life, which may last a few years, or be the transition to another career or to retirement. Teaching in basic education is also understood as a quite exhausting profession. This way, the follow-up in the initial years of HTF has the intention to avoid the "clash of reality" of the beginning teachers and to make them stay longer - and with less frustration - in the teaching activity. We may say it attempts to avoid (early) evasion of the profession, to improve the quality of teaching work and to minimize burnout.

HTF and TEP have somewhat different structures. After the concomitant offer of both, evaluations will be carried out to show which program is most appropriate, whether both should remain, whether they should be agglutinated and undergo improvements, etc.

Conclusion

Results allowed us to reflect about professional identity of teachers, teachers' knowledge, competences and teaching profession. It opens possibilities of discussions with renowned Brazilian and foreign authors (such as Tardif, Perrenoud, Garrido, Pimenta and Brzezinski), and, in particular with the work of Suze Scalcon (2011).

"What a teacher should know" and "who he or she should be" are fundamental questions for the curriculum. They refer to the conceptions that direct the policies and practices of teacher education in each country, and that we briefly presented here.

Regarding international transfers between countries, there are indicators that globalization and international competition influence the three institutions. The economic bias appears strongly in some Brazilian policies and in the Bologna Process.

As shown before, we did not find common tendencies in teacher training theoretical orientations in the analyzed countries. Brazil, as Lima, Azevedo & Catani point out

(2008), oscillates between dialoguing with the international system, reacting to it or being a shy mix of Harvard and Bologna.

In Europe, Bologna Process pushes for post-graduation the only formative exit for basic education teachers, in the United States there seems to be, paradoxically, a movement towards teacher no need of specific specialization. This tendency may occur because of a lack of teachers in some regions.

With regard to local decisions on curriculum, the commitment of teachers' trainers to basic education is one of the main factors for the effective training of future teachers also committed to quality of education. If in the daily routine in their classes, professors focus the attention of students and directs them, for instance, to research methodology and motivate them only to go to doctorate, it is clear they won't leave university with the desire to work at basic schools.

It calls our attention to the importance of the recruitment of teachers' educators, the existence of institutional commitment to the process of teachers' education (if not regional or national) and of the involvement of community in the construction of the pedagogical plans of the courses.

Those are some of the conclusions of our research. We hope our study can help on the expansion of knowledge and reflections about teacher education, especially to a better articulation between theory and practice in teacher training programs, among many other factors that still need our attention worldwide.

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