The Implications of Research as a Formative Space to Understand the Teaching Practice
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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the importance of research as a formative space in order to understand the teaching practice. The theme is in the realm of the project titled “Qualification and Profession: understanding the knowledge that is the base of the teaching practice.” This project seeks to capture the representations that students/teachers have of their profession.

As the reflections are wide-ranging and complex, an analysis will be made of the problem of research and its implications for the teaching practice in the different qualification contexts: from the university to school.

In this perspective, we first seek to briefly contextualize the Research Project involving interns of a private University (1st phase, 2003) and the students-teachers of a Continuing Education Program of a public University in partnership with the municipal school network (2nd phase, 2004/2005), moments which served as the base for the 3rd phase (2006/2007) undertaken with the teachers that formed the respective contexts of teaching production.

Secondly, we seek to focus reflection on two issues the research introduced: first on the needs and perspectives of the students-interns, of the student-teachers, and of the qualifier teachers in the understanding of the knowledge that is the base for the teaching practice; and, second, on the indices to be used to characterize the process practical knowledge acquisition process of the student/teacher who is being qualified. These aspects will give meaning to the role the survey has, particularly research-action, in the practical analysis of teaching.
And, finally, a few principles of action and research – of research-action – will be presented, which, although not exhaustive of the discussion as a whole, can contribute to illustrate their importance in providing guidance on the teaching practice.

1. The forming Contexts: the “findings” of the research

In the current scenario, we realize we know very little about the practical knowledge teachers have. As any other professional, teachers have to have knowledge organized in several dimensions and delimited by criteria of professionality. Teachers’ functions are dimensioned in a sociocultural, institutional, and didactic context, since, according to Mialaret (1988), teachers establish relationships with the society, with culture, knowledge, professional practice, and pedagogic knowledge.

We also understand that the process involved in acquiring professional knowledge involves learning complex structures that can only be made explicit when the means through which practical knowledge is acquired in the entire formation process are analyzed. And that this process is organized, minimally, in the form of: concepts, schemes or networks of propositions (León, 1995); rules, principles and images (Elbaz, 1981); guidance (Rubalcava, 2000); structure, practice and habitus (Abdalla, 2003; 2006).

When we think about the reconstruction of the axis above, we understand that: firstly, practical knowledge has some type of structure, since teachers work in a field of power that is structured by a space of force relationships; secondly, that this knowledge is configured in its practice: in its experiences and in knowledge in actual situations; thirdly, there is a way of being in the profession: a habitus – a principle that generates distinct and distinctive practices, according to Bourdieu (1997, p. 22). This habitus translates the way the teacher guides and structures his/her practice, setting a capital of knowledge, of knowing-doing and of knowing-being into motion.

With this in mind, we part from the principle that there is a process involved in acquiring practical knowledge that is differentiated according to the qualification contexts: from the university to the school. In this regard, we believe it is important to investigate to what extent the pedagogic-administrative organization of the university/school influences the teacher’s professional qualification/development; which elements are fundamental to organize the practical knowledge; how these elements
allow the construction of a professional identity and to what extent the teacher’s professionality can nurture new practices, a more innovative school culture.

As such, it was, therefore, necessary to answer these questions: how does the teacher learn how to teach? How does the teacher build his/her training model? How do the thoughts and actions of the teacher in training evolve? What are the teachers’ main training needs? How is the process of acquiring practical knowledge characterized? Which aspects of the work context could explain the evolution (or not) of the teaching career? Which perspectives do interns, rookie teachers, and more experienced teachers have regarding their background and their professional development?

These questions show the central problem of the research project: the representations/manifestations of the students/teachers regarding the profession and the knowledge that is the base for the teaching practice, which have the following objectives as subjacent factors: firstly, knowing the needs/perspectives of the interns, rookie and training teachers; secondly, bringing up the indices that characterize the process of acquiring practical knowledge; thirdly, analyzing their representations on the formative dimensions of the teaching production contexts.

This text intends, based on these issues, to briefly contextualize the three phases of the research project, highlighting aspects that helped us understand the importance of research as a formative space for the teaching practice.

**The role of the interns (1st Phase)**

Aiming at commencing the 1st Phase of the research project, that is related to “The role of the interns in understanding the knowledge that is the base for the teaching practice,” we held frequent meetings with the selected group, composed of one student (research assistant) and two collaborating teachers, the coordinators of the Internship Department and of the Pedagogy Course at the Catholic University of Santos. The purpose of these meetings was to detail and follow-up on the project as a whole.

As a hypothesis, we decided we should begin examining positive experiences in order to be able to better discuss the integration of theory and practice and the role the current Universities and Schools have in qualifying future teachers. The teachers accepted the suggestion and selected the schools of Letters, Psychology, Geography, and Pedagogy, emphasizing that: firstly, these colleges had projects underway that had
been assessed positively by both students and professors; secondly, they had partnerships with the schools, a fact that would contribute to good qualification; thirdly, their supervising professors were committed to and engaged with the preparation, execution, and assessment of interdisciplinary projects, meeting the needs and/or characteristics of the group they worked with and of each specific means investigated.

The team then proceeded to gather the data, based: 1) on the mapping of the interns of the respective Licenciate Degree Courses, in the past 3 years; 2) on the identification of the projects that were carried out, something that would allow positive experiences among the interns to be searched for; 3) on the cataloguing of the field schools at which the interns would carry out their initial training; and 4) on the access to a few reports prepared by students and/or teachers involved with the projects.

To follow-up on the interns, we selected nine projects and their respective reports involving all mentioned colleges. After reading and analyzing all of the material, we went on to elaborate the summary charts, identifying: first, the project and its contextualization; second, the executors: intern students, teachers in charge, and elementary education students; third, the objectives; fourth, the methodological procedures; fifth, the results, even if partial, but which included: a) the student’s interest in the class activities; b) the degree of participation; c) the positive aspects regarding the pedagogic experience; d) the negative aspects – difficulties ran-on to in any stage of the work (preparation, execution, and assessment); e) the analysis of the didactic resources and materials that were used; and f) the assessment of the participants and interns regarding the entire research project.

Based on the analysis of the projects and of the semi-structured interviews carried out with a few interns, we attempted to detect the role the internship had in the understanding of the knowledge that served as the base for the teaching practice, in particular of this stage that is supported and guided by a research project involving a partnership between a University and a School.

During the analysis and interpretation of the data that were collected, it was possible to identify which aspects highlighted the contribution the research had made in order for the interns to better understand why and how they were learning the teaching profession. Aspects, among others, the research brought up and that contributed to the
teaching practice. This matter was better understood when we progressed to the 2nd Phase of the Research.

From student to teacher: the first years in the profession (2nd Phase)

The purpose of the second phase was to follow-up on a group of teachers in a Continued Education Program/CEP-University Qualification, offered by the University of São Paulo’s College of Education, in partnership with the Department of Education of the Municipality of Santos (São Paulo).

We investigated the personal and professional path followed by kindergarten and 1st to 4th grade teachers. The main challenge was showing the participant group means through which they could respond more competently to the problems they experienced, experimenting solutions on the path towards guidelines towards a more transforming action, based on the forms of power, on the level of participation, and on the specificity of the forms of actions (Thiollent, 1996, 1997) of the parties involved.

The reflection on this actual learning helped us understand, from the 1st phase of the research project, that adopting research-action as a methodological conception would be the best way to learn reality as a whole, to consider it in the fluidity of its process and, particularly, allow for the active involvement of the teachers in the reality to be investigated, as had happened with the interns when they undertook their different research projects among the school community.

The difference, now, is that we intended to carry this research process out and analyze this whole together with the subjects being researched. That way, research-action would offer tools to understand the practice and question it, demanding forms of action and conscious decision-making. It was necessary to understand and have the student-teachers understand the meaning and the importance of research-action.

According to Thiollent (1997, p. 36), research-action supposes a concept of action that “demands, at least, the definition of several elements: an agent (or actor), an object on which the action applies, an event or an act, an objective, one or several means, a field or a delimited domain.” Among the elements, we highlight as agents (or actors): the tutor and the advisor professor (this researcher), that would lead the process of training 21 student-teachers, who would, in turn, develop their projects also defining
their research objects, the problem issues, the objectives, and the means to translate them in the different work contexts.

On the other hand, research action also supposes a concept of research inserted in action, as Desroche (1990) would say, simultaneously highlighting three aspects: firstly, reflecting on the social actors, their actions, transactions and interactions, seeking the explanation; secondly, it serves to provide spontaneous practices with a rational practice, highlighting the purpose of the application; and, thirdly, it is composed of the action of the actors themselves, both in their conceptions and in their execution and follow-up, the goal of which is the implication (Desroche, 1990, p. 98).

To realize the understanding of research as a formative space, we focus on these three aspects – research about/for or by-, and we added yet another fundamental element: developing research-action with the students-teachers, aiming: firstly, not only to explain reality, rather, above all, understand it; secondly, not only to apply the knowledge unilaterally, rather to establish a theoretical/practical relationship to better clarify the movement of what is learnt at the University and in school; thirdly, to contribute to emancipating the students-teachers to make them understand the meaning of implying themselves with their realities, taking-on their own actions.

This choice was preceded by the following reflection: identify, from the onset, who the student-teacher was, what their background, professional performance, and experiences in the classroom and in the school were. It was necessary to progress towards being able to undertake a theoretical reading of one’s identity and think, collectively, about their training project as an interface for action, to change, and to intervene in reality.

Understanding these issues also required a maturing process for all, beginning with the propositions of the formation/action project:

• the need to build a balanced path when selecting themes and guiding the research projects, providing a better understanding of the professional learning process;

• the apprehension of these projects would be one of the guiding lines that would structure the gatherings, encouraging the exchange of experiences and improving the development of competencies and knowledge regarding the production, appreciation, and investigation processes;
• the understanding of the methodological path that was traced (participant observation and its records: using the “reflexive diary;” the semi-structured interviews; the autobiographical accounts), to understand the theoretical/practical relationship and the types of content involved in the different action/research and learning situations.

1.3. What the training teachers say (3rd Phase)

In this 3rd phase, eleven teachers who trained the interns of the 1st phase (Pedagogy (3), Letters (1), Geography (1), and Psychology (1)) and the student-teachers of the 2nd phase (5) were interviewed. Of all questions we brought up, and considering these teachers were those who had developed an investigation practice, both in the initial training and in the continued education actions, we highlight, herein, a few of the results regarding the following issue: to what extent can research be considered a formative space? We grouped these results in two major axes: the organization and operation of the class that develops an investigation practice, and the theoretical-practical perspectives that are the base for this practice as a training strategy.

With regard to class organization and operation, it was noticeable the teachers highlighted at least two aspects:

• First, the rules, principles and images, as Elbaz (1981) would say, which we could also translate as the class “structure” (Abdalla, 2006, p. 72-74). Here, we part from the principle that there is an organizational class structure – administrative and pedagogical – set into motion by the symbolic interaction of the social groups we deal with (whether the interns, in the 1st phase; the student-teachers, in the 2nd phase, and/or the qualifier teachers, in the 3rd phase).

So far as the rules are concerned, the qualifier teachers realized that by developing the classroom practices, supported by the research, they had to better clarify how the interns and student-teachers had to deal with their research problems. The rules, therefore, took-on a value dimension, since the teacher had to remind them, at all times, how important it was to reflect on the practice (“braking,” as such, much of the “resistance”); and an assessment dimension, since the teacher presented how they should describe, analyze, and interpret the data they gathered to produce knowledge. This was the “didactic contract.”
With regard to the **principles**, it was possible to notice there were at least two of those Connors mentioned (in Rubacalva, 2000, p. 270): **authenticity** by the teacher and his/her **self-control**, since the teacher masters the content and the didactic forms, picks strategies, follow stipulated rules, and is aware of his/her behavior and of its implications among the students.

With regard to the **images**, it was important to know, also according to Elbaz (1981, p. 61), how these qualifier teachers had their experiences and how they experienced them, i.e., the images they had of this experience. These are a few accounts:

When I returned to my routine, I felt a blend of frustration and anxiety for change. I realized that with investments and seriousness, it is possible to build better education. I felt the need to interfere more in education.

We started getting to know each other, to get an idea of the network. There was consensus and disagreements too, but the product was a significant change to the curriculum in effect.

It was a “dialectic” process between introspection, which allows for reflection, and the outside: people, contexts, and processes that involved us in our existences.

More than work, it was a pleasureful, necessary process, proving reflection is as important as scientific knowledge. It is reflection that vests the teaching practice with a differential; therefore, it must be exercised in daily life in teaching. (Group of qualifier teachers. In: Abdalla, 2007, p.25).

The photos that come with these words reveal the positive experiences that they experienced, and that were able to imprint new **habitus** (Bourdieu, 1997; Abdalla, 2004, 2006), as they built and socialized knowledge.

- **Second, the theoretical and practical perspectives to instantiate research as a training strategy** – it was possible to identify, in the teachers’ statements, research as a fundamental tool to train the (future) teacher. To systematize them, we borrow what Rubalcava (2000, p. 272-273) is denominating as **guidance** the teachers provide while teaching. To us, this guidance is developed as **theoretical-practical perspectives** and are personal (of one’s experience), social, theoretical, and situational in nature.

  **Personal perspectives** reveal the experiences the teachers had (or didn’t have) in their training. All of the interviewed teachers considered investigation-based teaching necessary, although they had never had the chance to carry out this type of practice, with students, in the classroom.
With regard to the *social perspective*, they considered research as a better way to describe contexts, meet social demands, and understand the needs and the problems, seeking to overcome them.

Regarding *theoretical perspectives*, the teachers highlighted that the different experiences with teaching and research allowed them to get a better understanding of the theoretical and practical relationship to theorize about practice. They also served to understand “how the teacher uses theoretical knowledge; which theories he/she accepts voluntarily, and how his/her knowledge is built with regard to theory” (Rubacalva, 2000, p. 273).

So far as the *situational perspectives* are concerned, the teachers once again confirmed the importance of research in the context of the classroom and of the work. Investigating practice allowed the students and teachers to confront theory and practice by observing, comparing, analyzing and interpreting data.

They were able to get a better understanding of the decision-making process in each situation they had to face. They also reaffirmed the understanding they had collectively of the contradictions regarding daily life, their own beliefs, and their representations of the different knowledge there was to solve the problem situation and/or the challenges to be faced.

After outlining the propositions and reviewing a few elements in the process of executing and following-up on the different phases of this investigation, we believe it is important to also emphasize to what extent the perspective of the research (and of research-action) would be emancipating the interns, student-teachers, and qualifier teachers in the performance of their teaching practice. This meant considering, particularly, the *epistemological implications* (Barbier, 2002, p.100-102), better yet, *how* our research subjects were getting stronger in their interaction with the world, in feeling, thinking, and acting to allow for a more reflexive, critical, and autonomous space to take positions on. And that lead us to ask: how can research and, particularly, research-action, actually contribute to the teaching practice and to its analysis?

2. The role of research in the teaching practice

When analyzing the main effects of research on the teaching practice, two aspects called our attention. First, it was necessary to clarify the needs and perspectives
of the interns, rookie teachers, and of the qualifier teachers (research subjects) – which involves theoretical meditations and testimonials of the daily practice in the process of research and action (of teaching). And, second, being able to present indices to characterize the qualifying teacher’s process of acquiring practical knowledge, which entails revealing the “findings” of the research and, then, problematizing them.

Clarifying the “new” representations

In fact, when speaking about the “new” representations, about the needs/perspectives, about the several moments and professional spaces, we represent our reality, build our lives, and explain them based on our stock of knowledge. As we have already said (Abdalla, 2003, p.75), “these representations can be thought of as the raw material of a wider-ranging social analysis, and be used to guide a pedagogical, political action of transformation.” As Bakhtin (1995) would say, they picture and refract reality.

What were, therefore, the needs/perspectives of the interns, of the rookie teachers and of the qualifier teachers during the research project? How was it possible to clarify these “new” representations when facing the challenges imposed by daily life in the classroom?

The possibility of participating in these three research moments led us to a better understanding of the problem of analyzing the needs/perspectives in teacher qualification, as Rodrigues and Esteves (1993) say. In this study, we noticed that the needs/perspectives of the subjects involved gave rise to the “new representations” (Abdalla, 2000), and configured a few dimensions (Abdalla, 2003, p. 83-84):

- **personal** – to the extent the interns, rookie teachers and qualifier teachers revealed their personal needs, the knowledge of their experiences, enhancing the practical/professional knowledge, building, by this, a more autonomous identity that is willing to overcome itself;

- **didactic** – when they faced the challenges of the pedagogic situations and of the methodological issues brought-on by the research project; they organized the work in groups, creating a more professional, coherent culture;

- **institutional/organizational** – understanding to what extent the institutional culture and atmosphere affected their performance as students/teachers; how they gave
new meaning to the school and the university as a social and scientific object - “field of educational social practices” (Canário,1996, p.137)-, in which it is necessary to develop “pertinent investigative activities” (p.137) to build meaning for the teaching action;

- professional – to the extent they reflected systematically about their practices, using the results of reflection to improve the quality of their performance.

These dimensions allowed us to get a better understanding of which indices characterized the process of acquiring practical/professional knowledge.

Enunciating indicators to characterize the process of acquiring practical knowledge

There are several ways to deal with this issue. We can enunciate these indices using the university and school contexts as reference axes: emphasizing, that way, the social space of knowledge.

In the university context, thinking practice differently - changing representations -, configured, to us, three formative dimensions. The first is related to the process of acquisition itself, by the intern, the rookie teacher, and by the qualifier teacher, of knowledge that will cause them to reconsider their professional learning, and redefine them as teachers. Such acquisition entails, especially, giving new meaning to the concept of need/perspective as a practice to define the objectives of action and change or desired direction (Rodrigues; Esteves, 1993, p. 17-18; Abdalla, 2003, p. 75-80).

The second regards the reflection that must be made to integrate the different moments of the action, of research, and of research-action, from the initial qualification to the ongoing qualification actions to collaborate with a new posture: that of teacher-researcher and researcher-teacher.

The third is articulated with the analysis of how to drive the (future) teacher and the qualifier teacher’s action/intervention capacity in their pedagogic practice, in the attempt of permanently rebuilding their identity and the institutions where they work.

In the context of the school, if we could translate the impressions the interns and the teachers had, we could say that imbricated epistemological/methodological issues and the diversity in focuses and realities encouraged a better organization of the knowledge related to the professional practice, developing a new understanding of the didactic knowledge-practice that values the action of theorizing about reality: theorization.
In the case of the interns, the possibility of theorizing about reality took place beginning with their participation in different projects the Internship Department had in partnership with the field schools. According to them, the research projects allowed for:

• first, a better experience of the professional field (getting to know the curriculum better and possibly intervening; the task of teaching and research as support for this task);
• second, a better understanding of the importance of interpersonal relations, of intervention and of experiencing new technologies in carrying out the proposed activities;
• third, a differentiated view of the school context and of the classroom;
• fourth, a more sensitive ear for the problems related to the lack of interest, indiscipline, and aggressiveness in the classroom;
• fifth, knowing and analyzing the didactic forms different contents take-on;
• sixth, discuss the possibilities and the limits of being a professional teacher.

According to the student teachers (the rookie teachers), research-action, as a way to understand reality, allowed a few aspects surrounding the professional/practical knowledge to be distinguished, among which:

• first, learning the profession becomes more conscious and coherent when one tries to face the issues of the work context, collectively, based on the different exchanges of experience;
• second, there is a need to reflect on the objective of research-action, which is to lead to transformation. Think of the school, continuously and collectively, seeking reflection to make qualitative changes in its daily life. These transformations, however, are only achievable through the person him/herself and according to the concrete situations that are experienced;
• third, it is necessary to develop competencies to perform a new professional posture that feeds not only off of learning about the educational reality, rather learning in, of and with reality, to reinvent professional and social images of improvement and change.

The qualifier teachers, meanwhile, stated that research drove, among them and their students, a more critical view of the possibilities of qualification (both initial and continued), since:
• first, there was a re-dimensioning of the organization and of the operation of the teaching-learning process: the data that were collected (via semi-structured interviews and class observation) showed how group work, coordinated by the qualifier teacher, using research as a qualification strategy, favored an incorporation of knowledge to the *habitus*, outlining new ways to learn and view the didactic situation;
• second, a critical relationship was developed with knowledge, reinforcing a theoretical, methodological, and epistemological qualification that is capable of pointing to the teaching practice as a principle and horizon;
• third, a critical assessment of the didactic situation was allowed. And, to the qualifier teachers, this meant: a) thinking about a more effective intervention in reality, the perspective of which is rebuilding meanings in a detailed, deep, and analytical manner; b) no longer being passive spectators, going on to, based on the investigative work, become active spectators – social player; c) understand, analyze, interpret this entire qualification process; and d) correct the paths of this qualification process, via a follow-up that is committed to research as a qualification strategy.

What we discovered is that research and, in particular, research-action was able to draw the two formative contexts (university and school) closer together, reducing the differences a little because, as the research subjects revealed, it was possible to make the *reading of the real*: a real reading capable of “devouring” the meaning of the teacher qualification and production context. What mattered in this reading was the way of producing more elaborate systematic thought about/for teaching/research, regardless of the contexts.

**In sum: on the principles of research to guide the teaching practice**

On this path, the exercise of describing, i.e., *putting practice into action*, allowed for an exchange of experiences on the record of the significant contexts, requiring everyone involved to have a posture of investigators of practice, in other words, of *theoreticians of action*, Bourdieu (1997) would say.

The data and the reflections that are presented showed the importance of research, not only as a method of investigation, but especially as a strategy of knowledge for knowledge that is capable of contributing to understanding the problem
of thinking well (Morin, 1999, p. 37). In particular, of thinking the teaching practice well.

We agree that many of the issues that were brought up have already been being discussed by those who fight for the quality of teaching and of research in our institutions. Our goal was to only emphasize that, when facing the challenge of thinking well, at least three aspects should be considered, showing our way of knowing and conceiving.

The first was determining to what extent research could contribute to viewing/listening, in a more sensitive manner, to the “affective, imaginary, and cognitive universe of others.” (Barbier, 2002, p. 94) The second was to emphasize the issue of coherence, in an attempt to check who research could contribute to more consistent, pertinent, wiser choices and decisions, as Freire (1997, p. 25) would say. And, finally, the third was to show to what extent research would in fact be an instrument of analysis and assessment of the teaching practice and, in this perspective, it would be formative space for understanding it.

With this in mind, it was necessary analysis the methodological path that was selected very well, establishing thematic axes, the “practical reasons” of the different subjects of the research, which qualified them, and the methodological reflection that sought to align a reciprocal action among the enounced theoretical categories and the observations of the concrete reality, in a procedural and spiraling manner (Barbier, 2002, p. 121-125).

To us, this thinking well meant thinking rationally (Bourdieu, 1998a: 23-73) about the effects and implications of research-action in the forms of power, participation, and action the interns, student teachers and qualifier teachers undertook in the contexts of qualification and work.

These effects/implications allowed us to give a new meaning to what Barbier (2002, p.123-124) considered the “effects of co-qualification.” In this case, they were able to incarnate a few generating principles, i.e., new habitus. We distinguish a few of them: a) the pertinence of the theory for practice to be reviewed on an ongoing basis; as well as the pertinence of practice to “evaluate” theory; b) the matter of coherence between discourse and practice, intensifying the meaning of “thinking rationally;” c) the need for sensitive listening to assert the researchers’ coherence (Barbier, 2002, p. 94).
and to imply it epistemologically, “clearing,” as such, their “posture” and emancipating them; d) the possibility to theorize – as the “act of the word” and the “act of decision,” dialecting “individual and collective changes” and “undertaking interpretation” (p. 108), to receive and engage the “collective researcher” who is so necessary in the school space; and e) the reinforcement of autonomy with regard to choices and positions, and even coercion, as a market of symbolic goods is developed (Bourdieu, 1998b, p. 192), allowing one to enhance the forms of power, participation and action in the school community.

This is where we find the reason for being of research as an instrument of analysis and assessment of the teaching practice. This suggests it not only as a method of investigation, rather as a cognitive principle of understanding reality and the formative principle in teaching, Pimenta (1997, p. 51) would say. It also suggests it as a strategy for theoretical and practical knowledge capable of boosting the level of awareness: the incessant capacity we have to capture reality and express it in theoretical propositions, turning the unknown into known.

In practice, it is not easy to set students and teachers into motion around these principles, because they demand a formidable critical attitude (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 45). But, under the light of the analysis above, we believe these principles can not only be a guide to the teaching practice, but can, in the concrete condition of our actions, contribute to building a professional and qualification project.

**Literature**


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