

Autobiography and Discourse Theory: Deconstructing Discourses of Curriculum Policies of Teacher Formation in Brazil

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Starting the Conversation with Discourse Theory

Research on the production of curriculum policy and the delineation of this field of study in teacher education is recent in Brazil, as highlighted by Lopes and Macedo (2011). Studies began in the 1990s in Brazil and the United States and, for an even longer time, in England, since the 1980s. The theme of teacher identity is central to teacher education as well as to curriculum documents that seek to guide this education in a given historical context through national, international or local reforms, as we have discussed in the Curriculum and Culture Policies research group at UERJ in the PROPED program, in the UFF Curriculum Research group at the Angra dos Reis campus (GPeC) as well as in publications by Lopes, Macedo and Tura (2012).

We also highlight that research on curriculum policies and teacher education showcases the leading role of teachers, as agents considered to be key players in curriculum policy changes. Teachers are the ones who reframe knowledge as well as disseminate and transform the political-pedagogical discourse in educational practice. This curriculum police is sometimes signified by omission of teacher performance or formation, often as part of a discourse of teacher blaming for students' failure in the national² and international (Common Core³) assessments. Conversely, the teacher may be marked by a space of "deification" and that signifies the teacher as a "partner" in the changes and curriculum projects proposed by national and international bodies. In our studies, our research group understands that this movement of continuous discursive production of meanings makes us assume certain social positions while simultaneously producing "new global identifications and new local identifications" (Hall, 1997, p. 1).

In previous studies⁴ in Brazil, I have addressed teacher education policies and the meanings of such policies. The hegemonic discourse of these policies has sought to position teachers as "being" or "being able" to perform their teaching functions and thus, contribute to the learning of their students. Opposed to these monocultural discourses, I have disagreed with them insofar as they are understood to be based on discursive and cultural constructions. Running through them are the power mechanisms that underpin these curriculum policies. That is, there is a "system of cultural representation" (Hall, 2006, p. 49) that creates meanings while building identities.

Curricular reforms should defend difference, intercultural dialogue and the fluidity of the processes of identification of the subjects they are intended for; this is very important, since any closure that approaches standardization ends up forging "patterns that bring the negation of the other" (Lopes and Macedo, 2008, p. 21). Dialogic space is a continuous process of production of meaning. And, as Mouffe (2003) points out, the recognition that these identification processes encompass a multiplicity of elements,



allows for a porosity of borders, contributing to plural contexts that value diversity and dissent, thus the possibilities of a democratic life to be achieved.

Urged to think about teacher education policies and the repercussions of curricular centralization proposals for schools and teacher education (Craveiro & Ribeiro, 2017), we have been considering ways to deconstruct reforms that signal the closure of plural contexts. To this end, we propose another way to think about ways of researching, changing and deconstructing discourses in the curricular policies for teacher education and for the schools. This alternative combines autobiographical discourse with Discourse Theory. We assume that curricular reform for teacher education seeks to establish a specific identity with the intention of defining, in advance, the ways of acting of these subjects, for example, research by Freitas (2013), Craveiro and Freitas (2017), Craveiro and Oliveira (2015), and Craveiro and Pugas (2013) who, despite the different ways and approaches towards the teacher in curricular discourses, hold in common the teacher as protagonist.

Seeing the teacher as protagonist in curricular policies means that the teacher is a social agent who re-signifies knowledge, and spreads and transforms political-pedagogical discourse into diverse educational situations, thus contributing to the learning of their students. However, we understand that this process, which for the moment we call “re-signifying of the discourse”, is uncontrollable, contingent and precarious (Laclau, 2009), given the centralizing discourses of national curricular reforms.

We agree with Borges and Lopes (2017) that curricular policies guided by the logic of control, either through centralized evaluations or through the control of interpretation via prescriptions or propositions of curriculum, seek to centralize the meanings in teacher education regarding the school knowledge to be acquired. Far from promoting a “quality of teacher education,” they end up “operating in the crystallization of identities” (p. 9). However, despite operating in a logic of ‘predictability’ by supposed ‘control’ of the directing of school activities, they fall short of controlling the discursive-pedagogical process of teachers.

We defend this understanding by realizing that every discursive process is tied to the social meaning of its context: “discourse is a complex unit of words and actions, of explicit and implicit elements, of conscious and unconscious strategies” (Laclau cited in Burity, 2008, p. 42). Discourse is also understood as a political construction of meaning production and therefore, as more than just speech or writing. Thus, it is understood that discursive formation “is always an articulated but heterogeneous set of discourses, that is, systems of rules of meaning production” (Laclau cited in Burity, 2008, p. 42) that hegemonize the plurality characterizing speech at any given moment. For Laclau (2009), one of the central characteristics of articulations is their contingent, precarious and provisional character, therefore subject to the different demands that disarticulate and produce new discourses. By disarticulate, we mean start a new discourse with different connections and production.

From this discursive understanding, we find that curriculum productions involving teacher education and their social practices in the school context are part of a continuous production of meanings that make teachers assume certain social positions while producing “new global identifications and new local identifications” (Hall, 1997, p. 1). Therefore, it is possible to say that the discourses produced in the texts of curriculum policies aimed at teacher education coexist with different social and cultural discourses that are reinterpreted, recreating new discourses. In this continuous production of meanings, teacher education is marked by a tendency to naturalize certain meanings of the curriculum, establishing an interface between pedagogical discourse and teacher education curriculum policy discourse.



Meanings circulate for what is meant to "be a teacher", what constitutes teaching identity, what can count as positive qualification or not for teaching performance in relation to what one supposes society expects from this performance. We argue that these meanings should not be naturalized as constituents of teaching identity. Rather, they are produced discursively in the social relations of the context in which they are managed. Therefore, understanding this discursive production in a given context may contribute to denaturalize them.

I clarify that "we understand *context* as a system of provisional meaning, produced by antagonism and exclusion" (Laclau, 2011b cited in Lopes and Cunha and Costa, 2013, p.398) and provisional identifications where many processes of signification are produced in the "field of the different relations of which emerge all *and* every one of the particular identities" (Laclau, 2011, p.38). In other words, context could mean a provisional "closing" of meanings produced by social actors.

On the one hand, curriculum policy discourses addressed to teachers seek to naturalize certain senses for "being a teacher", as a social actor that reverberates certain knowledges and certain experiences in their school practice. On the other hand, and at the same time, the teacher constantly produces meanings in the context of school practice, with his/her students and with him/herself and, as a social actor, brings with him/her a repertoire of personal experiences, which are constantly re-signified in the social and subjective interactions coming from the discursive articulations in the context of their practices. In this sense, we emphasize with Miller and Macedo (2018) that in the discursive character of experiences: "[...] it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted by experience" (Scott, 1991, p. 779). Experience is discursive; the lived only makes sense within a discursive order that produces what it speaks of (Foucault 2009, p. 7).

We emphasize that this continuous production of meanings is discursive in the context of school practice in which we think about the social positions and the constitutions of the teacher's experience. We understand that the social function of language "is discursive production, and discourse is the limit of all objectivity" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2011, p.5). We add that the professional experience of the teacher is also discursive and as such, continuously produces constructions of identity constitution of the teacher.

We agree and reaffirm with Laclau (2011) that it is in the processes of identification within teacher education and in the incompleteness of such identity that is constituted the discursive, provisionally, of the social context. This process is in a continuous movement of antagonism, exclusion and identification of meanings that are important in understanding the particular constitution of teachers as social actors in the school context, which we will later articulate as teachers' autobiographical discourses. The identity "incompleteness" that is part of this process is what Laclau (2011) calls "the direct result of its differential emergence: no particular identity can emerge without supposing and proclaiming the exclusion of others, and this constitutive exclusion or antagonism is the same counter effect condition of every constitution of identity" (p.38).

In this research, we also believe it is interesting to think of the impossibility of control by which some curricular discourses seek to address teaching action and thinking as if it were possible to materialize the processes of teacher identification from the standardizing curriculum policies. In other words, standardized curriculum discourses drive us to think of identity incompleteness and the impossibility of control, in which exclusions and antagonisms are discursively produced by teachers in the social contexts from which they emerge in schools and their relation with centralizing curriculum proposals. These research interests are in keeping with the understanding that the narrative / autobiographical process can be considered an open process, a discursive



process of narration, excluding meanings with which it does not want to identify. This process, called metafiction, as Strong-Wilson (2017) identifies, is a process of self-reflection and the creation of stories that “reflects on its own process of creation as the story is being told” (p. 161). It is in this way that we understand that autobiographical discourses, in constant construction, are discourses that are not “fixed”, finished, or closed. We also agree with Macedo and Miller (2018) that autobiographical research can be viewed as “the main mode of inquiry and curriculum research, while rejecting the idea of a self-constituting subject” (p. 3) because of its being a research process that is built with the subject *in loco*.

However, the searching for dialogue with Ernesto Laclau's discursive approach and autobiographical proposals from teachers' discourses in the context of their curricular practices, will be signaled in the later section. We highlight here the potential of autobiographical discourses to think through new ways for teacher education, towards proposals that respect freedom and difference in school.

Dialoging with the Autobiographical Approach

In this section, I point out some possibilities for dialogue between my research that was already being done and autobiography, which has the power to denaturalize standardized discourses for teacher education and teachers' curriculum reforms. In disagreeing with standardized curriculum proposals for teacher education and / or the controlling of teaching activities (in Borges, Cunha & Craveiro, 2019)⁵ we argue that the use of autobiographical inquiry in school can be the opposite of such standardization, insofar as autobiographies are contextual and value the self. It is in this way that we seek to approach autobiographical discourses as a possibility for understanding the processes of constitution of teachers' identity and curriculum experiences in the school context. We also highlight, with Miller and Macedo (2018), “that the narrative of experience may be useful for questioning the normativity that have profound implications on how the difference is established, how it operates and in what form it constitutes the subjects who see the world and act in it ” (cited in Scott, 1991, pp. 777-778 & p. 954). We believe that autobiographical discourse, as an option still under construction, is one of several possibilities for “self-life writing” that, as Smith (2010) admits “is not a single unitary genre or form,” rather, autobiography is “ever contingent, adaptable, fluid, and dynamic” (p.18).

We understand autobiographical discourse as a story told about one's own experience, in the midst of a narrative and self-representation through a process in which, through critical insights, the “cracks” provided by the processes of reflection in the discourse shine, interrupting the usual ways of narrative (Strong-Wilson, 2015). In this sense, we can say that the processes of identity identification of teachers, contingent, fluid and provisional, are constituted through destabilization in autobiographical ‘journeys.’ This process is compared to a ‘journey’ because it develops from four moments of *currere*⁶, initially proposed by William Pinar and later appropriated by different authors such as Madeleine Grumet (1991, 2004) and Teresa Strong-Wilson (2008, 2015).

Smith (2010) emphasizes an interesting aspect about identity processes, highlighting the relations of identity with the social: “subjects know themselves in languages because experience is discursive” (p. 12) Day by day, in the exchange of knowledge, we connect with other social actors through language. We agree with the author that there is a discursive process in relations with the social and with social actors because “social organizations and symbolic interactions are always in flux; therefore, identities are provisional” (p. 18). It is necessary to clarify that in the discursive approach with which we identify, we do not understand identity relations with the social as producing different particular identities. Returning to Laclau (2011), it is in the



incompleteness of the particular identity that articulatory processes are sought, however this process does not constitute multiple identities, but multiple discursive processes of identification. In this sense, the identity of social actors isn't suited to different contexts because of its multiple identity. There are several identification processes that happen, produced through discourse. And so, we can say that "autobiographical subjects, then, are multiply vulnerable: to their own opaqueness, to their relationality to others" (Smith, 2010, p.38).

In the wake of Pinar and Grumet (2015), Strong-Wilson (2008), in one of her curriculum studies, offers us the possibility to reconstruct our understanding of the curriculum from teachers' stories. The stories embark on a path of discursive autobiographical process of critique and self-analysis within a collective context of memory-work (with small groups of teachers), using children's literature known to teachers in the classroom. Through their theoretical appropriation of *currere*, teachers build discourses based on their life histories and memories. According to Strong-Wilson (2008), such personal stories can be replaced (re-signified) with the "public" stories of children's literature that are told in school. This process is not immediate, as memories are narrated, recounted or 'layered' through Grumet's 'excavation method'⁷ in which childhood stories are confronted with teachers' current subjectivities and, in the process, can trigger the inner "monsters"⁸ of each teacher. In this way, the confrontations between public and personal discourses enables teachers to build difference in curriculum discourses. Strong-Wilson (2008) focuses on deconstructing the naturalized narratives in school that may hurt social justice.

In other words, Strong-Wilson gives importance to autobiographical narratives that are told through the teachers' memories of their teacher education and school experiences in a process of remembering, transmitting, interpreting and criticizing the hegemonic discourses that are repeated and transmitted in the culture of the school and, often, naturalized as belonging to the school environment. We are offered the possibility, through the autobiographical process of *currere*, a particular way to re-experience the narrated discourses through the school curriculum. The *excavation* method seeks to elicit cracks or openings with teachers in the process of constructing *difference* in the school curriculum.

Strong-Wilson (2017) corroborates Pinar's signifying of *currere* as a method of study, of intellectual and social engagement; as a possibility to open the way to learn to reflect, to open a space of agency through examining the structures of subjectivity.

Among Grumet's studies (in Pinar & Grumet, 2015), we would like to highlight the author's focus on the appropriation of *currere* as a possibility to redefine the experiences of childhood or the family environment, understanding that these narrated experiences could be part of some disciplinary discourses in education. Grumet (2004) presents us with some metaphors such as "home"⁹ or "green robe"¹⁰ (Grumet, 1991), for example, in which she illustrates, from her autobiographical stories, aspects of family life that can be resymbolized or reinterpreted in the curriculum but this does not always happen. "We try to connect children to a world that refuses to hear the songs of our own connections" (Grumet, 1991, p.84). Thus, the author invites us to rethink Dorothy Smith's ideological disjunction or rupture between family knowledge and school knowledge. According to Smith (1987, p.54 cited in Grumet 1991, p.84), "the ideas, images and symbols in which our experiences is given social form are not as that neutral floating thing called culture but as what is actually produced by specialists and by people who are part of the apparatus by which the ruling class maintains its control over the society". I agree with Grumet (1991) on the influence of social discourses on school, understanding that social control is managed by discursive productions (Laclau & Mouffe 2011).



In approaching the different appropriations of *currere* with Madaleine Grumet and Teresa Strong-Wilson, we identify different ways to understand the processes of constructing teachers' identity as singular, provisional and contextual, which in my view brings to light the unfeasibility of the proposed standardization for a school. Thus, autobiography can be a way to interrupt the habitual and to recover the teaching professional intentionality, using the past (memories), bringing the assumptions (assumptions) and future intentions of the storyteller (narrator / teacher) to bear on the spaces of the *difference* in the school.

The challenge of deconstructing hegemonic curriculum discourses in the context of teachers' autobiography

“We are responsible for the lives we lead” (William Pinar, in Preface (1976) Pinar & Grumet (2015)).

The purpose of our research was to present ways of autobiographical appropriation within our research group (GPcC). Although provisional (Laclau, 2011), we chose to share our incompleteness in order to strengthen and join other research that also seeks to deconstruct proposals with standardized meanings for school and / or teacher education. For this, our challenge is, as one of the contexts to be researched, a municipal school of Angra dos Reis, located in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The option for the autobiographical proposal is to go against the hegemonic logic of national curricular centralization / standardization. (In Brazil, curricular centralization has been gaining strength in curriculum policies since the 1980s, with increasing emphasis in the 2000s). That is, to enable “a complicated conversation” as Pinar (1995) would say, with teachers, we need to understand context “as a system of provisional meaning” (Laclau, 2011b p.7).

However, I also emphasize that at this moment, it is not the main intention of our research to deepen the studies of teacher identity, even though it is a central aspect of autobiographical studies in the field of teacher education. The central focus is to think of ways to bring dissonant discourses to the hegemonic discourses of curriculum standardization that fight to establish in Brazilian schools. In other words, we seek, through appropriation of *currere*, to empower the discourses of difference in curriculum discussions rather than the discourses of curriculum standardization.

We agree with and emphasize the appropriateness of Pinar's words in his 1976 Preface:

We must overturn the ideology (discourse)¹¹ of environment, the ideology which says, in whatever complexity, it is environment which determines life. We must work through our circumstances: material, intellectual, psycho-social. We must claim the environment as *our* land; we lay claim to it brazenly. This is our land, and we will make of it what we will. (p. xv)

Notes

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² In this regard, about the curriculum, teaching work, and the school as the field of *accountability* see Pereira, Costa and Cunha (2015).



³ For example, the 2010 US Educational Initiative that sets state standards, and details what elementary and high school students should know in English and Math subjects at the end of each grade, has become a reference for Brazilian policies.

⁴ Craveiro & Aguiar (2016), Craveiro 2015, 2014.

⁵ Borges, V.; Cunha, V. P. & Craveiro, C. (2019). Curriculum centralization policy in Brazil: A discursive perspective on academic researches. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry*, 16 (1) 2019 p. 23-37.

⁶ The method of *currere* is regressive, progressive, analytical and synthetical. “Regressive. The first step of the method is regressive. One returns to the past, to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present” (p.71); “Progressive derives from pro meaning “before” and gradi meaning ‘to step, go’ (...) we look at what is not yet the case, what is not yet present” (p.75); Analytical “describe the biographic present, exclusive of the past and future, but inclusive of responses to them” (p.77) and Synthetical “Syn-together+tithenai-to place. Put them aside. (...) I conceptualize the present situation. I am placed together” (p.79). From Pinar & Grumet. (2015).

⁷ “Method of excavation” (from Grumet) is a story in layers; the stories come from familiar contexts and childhood memories. It is a method for producing critical consciousness. Strong-Wilson (2008).

⁸ The monsters as a metaphor, a process of *currere* by which a teacher could confront her imagination with the real context with which she needs to accommodate her pedagogy. The “other”, the difference or some knowledge, has traditionally been represented as monstrous. Strong-Wilson (2008).

⁹ “(...) for most of us, the location of our earliest and most poignant experiences of fear and pleasure, disgust and comfort, boredom and excitement, was home” (Grumet, 1991, p.74). “Now this process of selection (memory), this determination that something matters, is very heart of curriculum. (...) The practical knowledge that we bring with us from home remains trapped in memory coded in images, sensory associations, stories, and emotions. Lodged in intuition, this practical knowledge is rarely extended to our work in the public world because it is rarely resymbolized through process that encode it for reflection and translation to others settings” (p.75).

¹⁰ “I avoided the personal, just as I avoided “authentic” and “sincere” as descriptors for this prose and for this process, and turned to multiple narratives to invite the range, the contradictions, and all the robes – silk, brocade, orlon, rayon (packs well), terry, seersucker, velvet, leather, feather – that students could find for this academic procession” (Grumet, 2004, p. 91).

¹¹ In our understanding, discourse.



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