Reflective teacher education towards learner autonomy: building a culture of possibility

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1 Introduction

To the extent that preservice students see schools as 'the reality' awaiting them, to be accommodated and adapted to rather than utilized as forum for inquiry, investigation, and critique, they may well come to see college courses that emphasize reflection and critical engagement as irrelevant. [...] When this attitude is widely shared, professional preparation programs become perceived as a largely irrelevant academic journey on the road to the real, practical job of teaching in the schools. [...] When teacher preparation is guided by a utilitarian, technical/vocational, assimilation approach, the educational status quo and the social realities with which they are aligned are furthered. (Beyer 1996: 7)

A significant sign of a generalized belief in technical rationality within pre-service teacher education programs in Portugal is the still prevalent conception of the practicum as the moment when student teachers are expected to apply received knowledge (from previous academic preparation, supervisors or both) to practice. On the other hand, their socialization into a school culture that still favours transmissive approaches often leads them to fall back on those approaches as a survival strategy. All this is aggravated by ad hoc, unarticulated approaches to supervision, a generalized lack of specialized preparation of supervisors, and weak coordination between universities and schools. In these circumstances, reproduction of the educational status quo, rather than its transformation, is favoured.

Using action research as a teacher development strategy that combines reflective teaching with learner-centred pedagogy can still be seen as a counter-discourse to prevailing pre-service teacher education practices in Portugal. This is the case of the supervision project presented here, which is not representative of standard approaches in teacher education institutions, including ours, though it is in tune with policies and academic discourses that favour inquiry-oriented teacher development.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the view of education underlying our approach to teacher education, with a particular focus on how our project contributes to either reproduce or transform established cultures of teaching and teacher education. We envisage our role as building a culture of significant possibility, that is, a culture where beliefs and choices are both context-bound and transformative, and where discourses and practices are situated somewhere between dominant and ideal realities.

2 A transformative view of (teacher) education

Any definition of teacher education must necessarily be embedded in a conceptualization of what school education is and should be. Put in other words, the direction of teacher education should be closely related

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1 Up to the moment when this text was first written, the project was developed by a team of supervisors from the Department of Methodologies of Education at the Institute of Education and Psychology in our university (the present authors and Isabel Barbosa, Madalena Paiva, and Isabel Sandra Fernandes). The project takes place in the final year of language teaching degrees (Portuguese/English, Portuguese/German and English/German), when student teachers do their practicum in a local secondary school (in groups of three or four per school) and are supervised by two supervisors (school/university). School supervisors follow the student teachers' work on a daily basis, whereas university supervisors have weekly seminars with the student teachers at the university and observe a minimum of three lessons per student during the year. Institutional regulations do not advocate any particular approach to supervision and supervisory practices vary a lot. Our team supervises around 40 student teachers per year, which is half of the FL trainees (the other half are supervised by colleagues in the Language Department).
to the intended direction of change in school education.

Viewing education as a process of transformation rather than reproduction requires that teachers, students and teacher educators become critical consumers and creative producers of knowledge, but also informed participants in the improvement of the rationality and justice of the educational and social situations they experience. Accordingly, teacher education and language pedagogy will be morally and politically committed to (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation whereby freedom, justice and equality are valued and pursued (Apple & Beane 2000, Beyer 1996, Dewey 2005, Freire 2003).

The potential value of this view of education can only be judged in practice. Experience always brings a view of education into existence; therefore we should ask: in what way and to what extent does it empower participants to transform rather than reproduce dominant practices, to challenge rather than conform to given situational constraints? Accordingly, what follows in this and the remaining sections should be read as a reflective analysis of the extent to which our work as teacher educators brings into existence a view of education as transformation, and how that view is shaped by our beliefs and aspirations, professional contexts, and the processes and outcomes of practice.

In our biographies as teacher educators, we have played several roles: teachers of prospective teachers (in foreign language methodology classes), supervisors of student teachers in training, coordinators of in-service teacher development projects, and teachers in postgraduate courses for teachers and supervisors. In performing these various roles, our professional choices have grown more evident and stronger as our struggle to integrate teaching, learning and supervision into a common framework becomes fruitful over time, using research as a tool to evaluate and improve the transformative quality of each of those three interrelated tasks. Figure 1 sums up that framework, highlighting our major choices in current work with (prospective) teachers.

The connections among the several different educational layers lie primarily in our ideological choices. Participation, collaboration, self-direction, social justice, and empowerment have become the cornerstone of our efforts to make education a transformative experience for all involved, as our work has come to integrate precepts of critical social theory, critical pedagogy and critical reflective teaching (see Fernandes 2005, Moreira 2003a, Vieira et al., in press). Within our approach, educational inquiry plays a central role and has a double purpose: to investigate and improve the quality of teaching and teacher education practices within a transformative view of education.

Central to both our practice and discourse as teacher educators is the belief that education can be transformative if a reflective approach to teaching and teacher education is articulated with the promotion of learner autonomy in schools:

[...] when learner autonomy becomes the object and goal of reflective teaching, professional reflection is empowering in some important ways: it entails a continuous mediation between pedagogical goals
and situational constraints, thus promoting not only teachers' awareness of how their action is historically determined, but also their sense of agency in transforming the conditions of teaching and learning; furthermore, it requires teachers to inquire into the implications of their theories and action upon learners, thus validating pedagogy on the basis of negotiation, something that fosters powerful, context-sensitive justifications for pedagogical options, and a strong sense of direction. If transformation is regarded as the goal and the process of teacher education and of school education, then teacher autonomy and learner autonomy can be seen as two sides of the same coin, the development of the former leading to the development of the latter, and vice versa. Only then, in our view, can education become a space for personal and social reconstruction.

(Vieira & Marques 2002: 4-5)

If teachers are to become critical practitioners, they must be able to coherently describe, analyse, interpret, confront and reconstruct their action (Smyth 1987), by engaging in a systematic self-evaluative mode of professional development (Ebbett 1985), with a view to changing the status quo. As university supervisors, we have developed an approach where action research is undertaken by student teachers as a way to develop reflective teaching towards learner autonomy, and in doing so we have come progressively closer to a critical view of supervision as a cultural activity aimed at transforming schools. How this view of supervision is brought into existence in practice is the topic of the next section, where we turn to our experience within a project that has been in progress since 1995.

3 Reflective teaching towards learner autonomy through action research

The assumption that inquiry is at the heart of pedagogy and professional development has greatly inspired our work with student teachers at the University of Minho. As supervisors, we have tried to enhance reflective teacher development through inquiry into pedagogy for autonomy in schools. In doing so, we have also tried to promote

our own development through inquiry into our practice as reflective teacher educators. (Vieira et al. in press)

This description of our work with student teachers oversimplifies its nature, as well as the dynamic interplay between ideals and practices. However, it is also trustworthy as it emerges from a long story which validates our choices. We will present a brief account of this story and discuss its value with reference to the view of education we espouse.

3.1 A supervision project

A brief chronology of episodes that relate our supervision project to other previous and subsequent initiatives undertaken within our team shows how our roles as teacher educators and researchers are articulated, and also how team work has enhanced a scholarship of teacher education that would be more difficult to develop otherwise.

- 1991-92: Flavia starts her PhD case study research on pedagogy for autonomy, working in collaboration with an English school teacher to design, implement and evaluate a pedagogical intervention aimed at promoting learner autonomy (Vieira 1998).
- 1994-95: Maria Alfredo conducts a case study for her MA dissertation, exploring the value of action research as a pre-service teacher development strategy in her role as a supervisor of a group of EFL student teachers in training (Moreira 2001).
- Since 1995-96 (the supervision project): In 1995, the team decides to innovate their approach to the supervision of FL student teachers by using action research as a means to promote reflective teaching towards learner autonomy. The project articulates ideas from both Flavia's and Maria Alfredo's research (see above), building on the previous experience of the team, who had long been exploring a reflective approach to supervision in a less structured way (Moreira et al. 1999a/b, Marques et al. 2001, Moreira 2006).
- 1998-99: Maria Alfredo starts her PhD research on the value of action research as a strategy for reflective supervisor development. She implements an in-service programme for FL supervisors and conducts two in-depth collaborative case studies with two school supervisors.
as a participant researcher (Moreira 2005a).

- 2000-01: Three of the team members – Madalena, Isabel and Sandra – conduct case studies for their MA dissertations, focussing on three aspects of our supervisory strategy: collaborative observation, reflectivity in supervisor discourse, and criticality in student teachers’ written reflections. The studies were conducted within the same context: one group of FL student teachers in training supervised by Madalena, who were developing an action research project on promoting learner autonomy (Barbosa 2003, Paiva 2005, Fernandes 2005, Vieira et al., 2007).

- Since 2003: Team members have conducted case studies with their students in FL Teaching Methodology courses (before the practicum year), so as to help them (a) improve their reflectivity, self-direction and ability for pedagogical innovation towards learner autonomy, and (b) realize the value of action research as a strategy for teacher and learner development (Barbosa et al., this volume, Moreira 2005b). These studies are part of a larger project on transforming pedagogy at university (Vieira 2005).

Figure 2 summarizes the supervision project as regards its major assumptions, aims, strategy and tasks, showing how principles of teacher education and language pedagogy are integrated into a common framework in the context of the practicum. Action research projects are designed according to the student teachers’ pedagogical concerns so as to promote learner autonomy, which is a major topic of foreign language methodology courses before the practicum. Project themes range from general issues (motivation, student behaviour, assessment, etc.) to particular language skills (writing, reading, etc.), and are usually related to perceived learner needs.

In the next two sections, we will focus on the value and problems of our approach, which will help us understand the extent to which it empowers participants to transform rather than reproduce dominant practices, to challenge rather than conform to situational constraints.

3.2 Evaluating and sustaining choices

By engaging in small-scale action research so as to develop
Professional reflectivity and learner autonomy, student teachers undergo a process of transformation as regards their professional attitudes, values, beliefs, and practice. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from a student teacher's final reflection on her project, which is representative of the way most student teachers evaluate their experience:

At the beginning of the year I was very concerned about my posture in the English classes. I was very self-centred, trying to understand and improve what I was doing. With this project, the focus of my action changed. Whereas initially I was centred on me and my problems, I gradually started to centre my attention on the students and on how to help them solve their difficulties. This change of focus brought about many other changes. Practices and materials now emerged from the classroom context, that is, from perceived needs and motivations.

This new critical stance leads to a continuous process of questioning and inquiring into knowledge and experience. Now it is not enough to apply a given strategy. It is necessary to apply it, question its effectiveness, and make changes if needed. In other words, it is necessary to be attentive before, during and after the lesson. Practice is no longer routine-based and definite. The task of being a teacher became more difficult. [...]

The project allowed me to establish an integral relationship between theory and practice. I can now see that the barriers between them are practically non-existent, as I resort to theory to reformulate practice and vice-versa.

The project expanded my perspectives as a teacher. Today, instead of paying attention only to the final product, I am also attentive to processes. The quality of the process influences the final product a lot, as I could confirm several times. Questioning, inquiry, awareness and autonomy are now fundamental attitudes in my stance towards teaching. Today I assume a much more intervening position, where re-adjustments to contexts are permanent. (Lurdes, final critical report from action research portfolio, June 2000, translated).

Throughout the years, we have identified the positive outcomes of the project on the basis of the student teachers' and their students' appreciation records (portfolio reflections and answers to questionnaires filled in anonymously – see Figure 2):

- The vast majority of the student teachers acknowledge the value of their action research projects for developing a reflective stance towards teaching (reflecting in/on action, inquiring into practice through action research, challenging established beliefs and practices, resisting conformity, becoming aware of the interconnectedness of teacher and learner roles, valuing innovation and reinforcing previous convictions on the need to move away from transmissive education).

  - The vast majority of the student teachers also acknowledge the value of their projects for promoting learner-centredness (learning about the students' interests and concerns, adapting to different needs and styles, promoting ability to reflect upon language and the learning process, fostering experimentation with and regulation of learning strategies, negotiating decisions and assessment).

  - The vast majority of school students acknowledge the value of their teachers' projects for enhancing learning (motivation, interest, effort, responsibility, ability to identify and solve problems, collaborative learning, language learning outcomes).

  - Many student teachers recommend that our approach be adopted across the institution, as they feel it is rewarding and worth pursuing.

The transformative power of the project lies not only in its positive outcomes but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, in our continuous struggle to uncover, challenge and manage constraints identified on the basis of ongoing evaluation. They can be grouped under three interrelated areas: cultural resistance, methodological limitations, and student teachers' personal factors. Table 1 (Vieira 2006, adapted) summarizes them and presents our main strategies to counteract their effect and sustain the choices we have made.

Data from case studies undertaken by the team on the roles and discourse of supervisors and student teachers further suggest that there are some major shortcomings within our approach which have to do with two interdependent phenomena: role demeritization and criticality (see Vieira et al. in press):

- Symmetrical participation in observation conferences is hard to achieve: (a) the university supervisor tends to dominate discourse and roles are often unequally distributed; (b) student teachers' show different degrees of participation; (c) the school supervisor should play a more decisive role in interaction (Paiva 2005).
CONTRASTS

Cultural resistance
- dominant culture of schooling as transmission
- dominant culture of teacher education as technical instruction
- dominant culture of research as production of academic, generalizable knowledge

Methodological limitations
- no previous teaching/action research experience
- mandatory action research
- lack of support in schools
- diversity of supervisory styles/agendas
- time constraints (student/teachers and supervisors)

PERSONAL FACTORS
- diverse expectations, beliefs, personalities
- reality shock
- lack of self-confidence
- lack of beliefs of reflection
- resistance to public exposure
- fear of external assessment

STRATEGIES

- uncovering the cultural forces, constraints, dilemmas
- encouraging an inquisitive, pro-active stance
- promoting school-university collaboration
- valuing and disseminating locally validated practices

- sensitizing students to reflective teaching
- pedagogy for autonomy and action research before the practice
- encouraging choice and initiative on the basis of personal concerns, interests, and practical theories
- providing ongoing support and encouragement
- fostering participatory and context-sensitive evaluation
- involving/training the school supervisors
- making the best of time (quality vs. quantity)

- accommodating diversity within a common direction
- generating and confronting alternatives
- being supportive, stimulating, dialogue and self-inquiry
- providing frames of reference to conceptualize practice
- fostering self-regulation as a basis for improvement
- negotiating final assessment (self-/co-assessment)

Table 1
Constraints and strategies

- The university supervisor’s discourse during observation conferences does not always reach a high level of criticality: (a) processes of theory and practice reconstruction are often absent; (b) an explicit focus on pedagogical assumptions is scarce; (c) reflection about the contexts of teaching and learning is not frequent (Barbosa 2003).

- Reflective moves in the student teachers’ written reflection (action research portfolios) rarely reach a high level of criticality: (a) problematization of macro-contexts of practice is scarce; (b) assumptions and moral implications of pedagogic options are often absent; (c) no evidence is found of a cyclical and dialogical use of written reflec-

tions; (d) problems of expression and personal writing styles sometimes affect clarity and coherence of ideas (Fernandes 2005).

- When university and school supervisors engage in collaborative action research to improve supervisory practices, role symmetry tends to be affected by unequal professional knowledge and experience (especially regarding research), and change tends to be local and problem-oriented, with no impact on larger contexts (Moreira 2005a).

Although these conclusions derive from empirical studies of particular cases, they resonate with our experience to a large extent and highlight our struggle as supervisors to put our value framework into practice. However, these shortcomings are not merely a matter of professional competence: they must be understood in the context of what we called “cultural resistance” in Table 1 above. In sum, we must work within the system in order to change it.

3.3 Working within the system in order to change it

The dominant culture of schooling, which is still very much content-based and teacher-centred despite the reform movements, creates a hidden agenda for supervisory encounters. Even when our goal is to encourage teacher and learner autonomy, the socialization of the student teacher into the school culture raises a set of legitimate priorities, concerns, and demands which often contradict that goal. Our role as “situational supervisors” (Walte 1995) depends largely on our knowledge and understanding of the historical and structural forces that constrain innovation in schools, but it is usually hard to fight them, especially in the position of outsiders whose authority is both strengthened and weakened by our academic status. On the other hand, student teachers’ projects are usually conducted in isolation from the rest of the school community, as niches of practice that rarely influence the larger context.

Teacher education practices tend to emphasize technical instruction (telling teachers what they should know and do) rather than reflective inquiry (facilitating critical understanding and deliberate intervention in educational contexts). This also raises conflicting situations as regards expectations and goals in the context of supervision, especially since tech-
4 Towards a culture of significant possibility

Teaching is impossible. If we simply add together all that is expected of a typical teacher and take note of the circumstances under which those activities are carried out, the sum makes greater demands than any individual can possibly fulfil. Yet, teachers teach. [...] We therefore confront two questions: What makes teaching impossible in principle? How is the impossible rendered possible in practice? (Shulman 2004: 151)

Shulman's thoughts might also be applied to teacher education. As teacher educators, we constantly need to manage conflicting rationalities and demands, confronting similar questions: what makes transformative education impossible in principle, and how is the impossible rendered possible in our and the teachers' practice? Like Shulman, we believe that precisely those characteristics that render teaching [and teacher education] impossible also present it with the potential to transcend the apparent limitations of the job and make it professionally creative and autonomous, that is, the autonomy intrinsic to teaching [and teacher education] is achieved as a function of its multiple competing and conflicting obligations, not in spite of them. (ibid.)

Our project has greatly enhanced our autonomy as learners of teacher education, and this is how our view of education becomes more than theory: it becomes "personally transforming" or "an avenue for constructive change which is personally meaningful and deeply felt" (cf. Hobson 2001: 135). As critical supervisors, we have worked towards overcoming technical views of teaching as applied science or uninformed decision-making, contextualizing pedagogy within a larger social and political arena and trying to enhance a transformative view of teacher and learner development. By supporting teacher inquiry and inquiring into our own practice, we have used research as a means for social action, examining the lives of teachers and learners in schools in an organic way, and telling tales of
possibility from our own and other people’s stories.

In moving between reality as it is and reality as we aspire it to be, we have tried to develop a culture of significant possibility:

The struggle between the ideal and the possible seems to point to a clear direction: the urge to develop a culture of significant possibility, which involves the interplay between conceptual frameworks, personal beliefs, (inter)personal will and choices, situational circumstances, and the historical forces of dominant cultures. It entangles both personal freedom and social responsibility, both power and empowerment or, better still, power to empower. (Vieira et al. in press)

Developing a culture of significant possibility is basically about shortening the distance between reality (what is) and our ideals (what should be), by exploring spaces of freedom and opening up spaces for manoeuvre (what can be). As we move away from education as reproduction, dilemmas become part of our professional selves in our (inter)action with others, keeping dialogue open and protecting us from intellectual arrogance or destructive scepticism.

References


Teacher development for learner autonomy: images and issues from five projects

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1 Introduction

"Like the artisans who construct a building from blueprints, bricks, and mortar, scientists contribute to a common edifice called knowledge. Theorists provide the blueprints and researchers collect the data that are the bricks.

To extend the analogy further, we might say that research synthesists are the bricklayers and hod carriers of the science guild. It is their job to stack the bricks according to plan and apply the mortar that holds the structure together." (Cooper & Hedges 1994: 4)

In the field of learner autonomy in language education, theorists and researchers have provided us with various "blueprints" and "bricks" that can help us understand the rationale and implications of pedagogy for autonomy. Yet, there have not been many attempts to "stick the bricks according to plan and apply the mortar that holds the structure together". A significant exception is Berson's (2001) review, which highlights the conceptual and methodological diversity in the field, as well as the need to further investigate the effectiveness of different practices.

One of the approaches identified in the literature is what Benson calls