Challenges and Possibilities of Teacher Education in Portugal in Neoliberal Times

MÁRIA ALFREDO MOREIRA

The most serious neoliberal threats to teacher education programs in Portugal started in the 1980s, when an unruly explosion in the private offer in Higher Education (HE), a process legitimized by the hegemonic neoliberal discourse at the time, took place (Moreira & Silva, 2016). Three consecutive right-wing majority governments used the legitimizing principles of a neoliberal ideology to open up the market: freedom of teaching and learning, downsizing the role of the State, and fostering the participation of what some would call the civil society in affairs regarded as being under the monopoly of the State (Moreira & Silva, 2016). While the public sector remained under control and regulation of the State, with tight assessment and accreditation systems, the private offer bloomed without any form of serious regulation. Only recently, under the auspices of the national Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES), has this situation been changed.

Teacher education programs in the public sector have been suffering the impact of these policies, as the number of programs has proved to be excessive and redundant. The majority of them are currently being shutdown, helped by a decreasing schooling population and an increase in tuition fees and education-related costs. However, the most pervasive effects take place at the level of pedagogy and assessment. One year ago, when working with primary teachers, I was addressing instrumentality in curricula choices and the pervasiveness of external assessment when one teacher replied: “But we have to prepare them [the children] for the job market.”

The neoliberal discourse has colonized the pedagogical imaginary in a way that renders invisible the educational effects of social inequalities; from the very start, teachers feel they ought to prepare students for the job market (whatever that is), to develop the “right” competences and teach the “right” content, to address problems in a positivist manner, to compare students and assess them in an “objective way,” and to teach in a way that will leave no room for subjectivity, differentiation, or sound professional judgment. The grand narrative of standardization and meritocracy has taken over the narrative of democracy and inclusion. From an early beginning, teachers are groomed into regarding students as numbers; into following a prescribed curriculum with a given textbook without questioning its very existence and relevance; into applying undifferentiated assessment formulae to students; into accepting that not all students are expected to succeed, as some students are “naturally” more capable than others. As two primary teachers recently wrote, when asked to reflect upon the effect of social inequalities in the quality of schooling:

Economic inequalities produce skills inequalities which mean that our society is not providing the proclaimed equality of opportunities to children. . . . Schools are given children in very unequal circumstances, but the school system treats them very unequally. (Martins, 2017)

schools and teachers tend to adopt a very standardized approach to [curriculum development], following books like the bible and creating no space for the students’ different interests, rhythms, to a real autonomy in learning. . . . So, I would say Portugal still has a lot of issues to solve before it is really possible for all children to receive adequate and appropriate education and . . . the first one would be to steer clear of a tendency to standardization. (Micaela, 2017)

Education is no longer a public good; it is now a commodity, so teacher education is increasingly becoming teacher training; a form of consumer service geared toward consumer satisfaction. The field of teacher education is filled with technical analyses and prescriptions to guide teachers’ work. The recent reform on teacher education curricula in Portugal mandates the following to be covered in the design of the component “General Education”: developmental psychology; cognitive psychology, namely elementary mathematics and reading; curriculum and evaluation; school as an educational organization; special educational needs; and classroom management and organization (Law n. 79/2014, May 14). However, it is not only teacher education curricula that are going “back to basics”—the national curriculum in primary education is anything but holistic, as it is almost reduced to mathematics and Portuguese language. And again, the state of the pedagogical affairs enters the realm of common sense ideology, where the conservative agenda conveniently marries the neoliberal momentum. The “good” teacher knows a lot of “fundamental” subjects like mathematics and language, dominates the required techniques to teach the average student, and knows how to design reliable, objective assessment tests, tests that will replicate the external exams, so that the student-consumer can be satisfied, schools can be ranked, and the market better served.

Some time ago, I wondered about how teacher educators fear students’ freedoms, in all schooling levels; students’ identities and rights to a democratic education; and how this fear influences the choices that are made regarding curricula, teaching methods, and assessment (Moreira, 2005). I was dwelling “in the shadow of silent majorities” (Braudillar, 1983, cit. in Greene, 2003), in the shadow of the students that are viciously domesticated, from as early as primary education to later in life when they become teachers, to obey, to be silent, to work hard to get the better possible grades in order to excel in a highly competitive system so they can enter the “right” higher education program that will help them get the “right” job.
In order to develop counter-hegemonic discourses, I and the (student) teachers with whom I work have been discovering the heuristic value of teacher narratives. As seen above from the testimonials, teacher narratives are counter narratives to single, overarching neoliberal narratives. They help teachers become critical inquirers, as they seek to unveil the ways power and ideology operate to undermine their professional autonomy and their students’ learning in a democratic society. Still, there are no easy paths or recipes to democracy. Their struggle entails taking an ethical standpoint as well as a political one, a struggle that never ends and that takes its toll on their and their students’ motivation, empathy, acceptance, and valorization of difference and subjectivity as uncompromising values. This has been our task; this will continue to be our struggle.

Notes

1. This work is funded by CIEd—Research Centre on Education, projects UID/ CED/1661/2013 and UID/CED/1661/2016, Institute of Education, University of Minho, through national funds of FCT/MCTES-PT.
2. Between 1987/88 and 1991/92, public HE grew 40 percent, while the private offer grew 250 percent; in the mid-1990s, the latter surpassed the number of admission vacancies offered by the public institutions (Lima, 2002, p. 104, cit. in Moreira & Silva, 2016).
3. As a result, in 2017 about a third of the private HE institutions are about to be shutdown, due to lack of: students, qualifications of the teaching staff, appropriate facilities, and other. Most of these HEI are still offering teacher education programs.
4. Alias are used to protect teachers’ identities.
5. Teacher education programs in Portugal are strictly regulated by the Ministry of Education that stipulates the teaching profiles; the length of the programs; the curricula components; and the number of credits for each component, the resources, the conditions for teaching practice, and other.

References