

Professor training in health postgraduate studies: analysis of an experience

Formação docente na pós-graduação em saúde: análise de uma experiência

La formación docente en el postgrado en salud: análisis de una experiencia

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze a professor training experience for higher education. **Method:** This is a descriptive case report on the professor training process in the postgraduate course of the College of Nursing of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo. An evaluative activity was performed to capture the perceptions and experiences of 21 graduate students who were interns of an educational improvement program. The data were analyzed following the thematic content analysis guidelines. **Results:** Three thematic categories were identified: 1) knowledge necessary for teaching practice; 2) teaching routines and practices; 3) the essentiality of mentoring. **Final considerations:** This article provides a critical approach on the formative process of human resources for higher education in health, identifying potentials and challenges. Its innovative character resides in understanding pedagogical work articulated with graduate research training.

Descriptors: Teaching; Nursing Faculty Practice; Staff Development; Education, Nursing; Education, Nursing, Graduate.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar uma experiência de formação de professores para o ensino superior. **Método:** Trata-se de um relato descritivo sobre uma experiência no processo de formação docente na pós-graduação na Pós-Graduação da Escola de Enfermagem de Ribeirão Preto da Universidade de São Paulo. Foi realizada uma atividade avaliativa para apreender as percepções e a experiência de 21 pós-graduandos que foram estagiários de um programa de aperfeiçoamento do ensino. Os dados foram analisados seguindo pressupostos da análise de conteúdo, modalidade temática. **Resultados:** Foram identificadas três categorias temáticas: 1) Conhecimentos necessários para a prática docente; 2) Rotinas e práticas da docência; 3) A essencialidade da tutoria. **Considerações finais:** Esse trabalho oferece uma abordagem crítica sobre o processo formativo de recursos humanos para o ensino superior na área da saúde, identificando potencialidades e desafios. Seu caráter inovador reside na compreensão do trabalho pedagógico em articulação com a formação para a pesquisa na pós-graduação.

Descritores: Ensino; Prática do Docente de Enfermagem; Desenvolvimento de Pessoal; Educação em Enfermagem; Educação de Pós-Graduação em Enfermagem.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Analizar una experiencia de formación de profesores para la enseñanza superior. **Método:** Se trata de un relato descriptivo sobre una experiencia en el proceso de formación docente en el postgrado de la Escuela de Enfermería de Ribeirão Preto de la Universidad de São Paulo. Se realizó una actividad evaluativa para apreender las percepciones y la experiencia de 21 estudiantes de posgrado que fueron pasantes de un programa de perfeccionamiento de la enseñanza. Los datos fueron analizados siguiendo los supuestos del análisis de contenido, modalidad temática. **Resultados:** Se identificaron tres categorías temáticas: 1) Conocimientos necesarios para la práctica docente; 2) Rutinas y prácticas de la docencia; 3) La esencialidad de la tutoría. **Consideraciones finales:** Este trabajo ofrece un enfoque crítico sobre el proceso formativo de recursos humanos

para la enseñanza superior en el área de la salud, identificando potencialidades y desafíos. Su carácter innovador reside en la comprensión del trabajo pedagógico en articulación con la formación para la investigación en el posgrado.

Descripciones: Enseñanza; Práctica del Docente de Enfermería; Desarrollo de Personal; Educación en Enfermería; Educación de Postgrado en Enfermería.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education teaching practice requires specific knowledge and training for performing in this level of education, especially for the areas/professions that do not have extensive pedagogical formation at graduation. The reality that still stands out today is that Health professors privilege and dedicate themselves with greater emphasis to improve specific knowledge of the training area to the detriment of pedagogical knowledge⁽¹⁾. Also, public policies corroborate to the scenario of fragility on the field of higher education, since it does not require pedagogical training for professors in this educational level⁽¹⁻²⁾. This way, *stricto sensu* postgraduation represents a good moment for pedagogical preparation, although it can, sometimes, be considered as a secondary aspect regarding research. Graduate students are, in general, professionals who are recent graduates from different courses. In the Health sector, these professionals may not be familiar to the practice in education or teaching, facing difficulties. The absence of knowledge on how to behave in the classroom can cause anguish and insecurity, which transform the teaching experience in a challenge. In the field of Health and Nursing, we must also consider the specificities of contents, attitudes and procedures required for professionals and that must be addressed in the classroom.

In this field, other perspectives require a look and reflection considering some singularities of training professors for teaching health, an example of the interdisciplinarity, training processes and of the recognition of professors as individuals. We propose, therefore, that the teaching practice itself, in a movement of action-reflection-action, should be considered as one of the starting points to make changes in daily teaching and learning, including the articulation of theory with practice^(1,3).

The integration to society of new professional profiles qualified and able to exercise health functions, such as nursing, depends on the performance of pedagogically prepared professors. By focusing on nursing courses, we observed the need for adequate pedagogical training to perform in higher education and, thus, to contribute with the training of nurses with critical thinking, creative and capable to deal with the demands of the profession, society and the world of work⁽⁴⁻⁵⁾. Nursing was taken as an example, but this picture can also be observed in other undergraduate health courses. These assumptions indicate the complexity that professor training has within the scope of postgraduate programs.

In this perspective, the teaching activity practice in higher education represents an important dimension to be considered in the training context selected in this report. The proposal of the Teaching Improvement Program (PAE – *Programa de Aperfeiçoamento de Ensino*), created in 1992 and reformulated in 1994, adopts a list of dimensions assumed for teaching: organizational, technical, didactic-pedagogical and of the professor-student

relationship. This Program, created to expand the didactic ability of graduate students and the support to undergraduate education, is composed of two steps: pedagogical preparation and supervised teaching internship. Pedagogical preparation is tied to specific knowledge of a particular area – in the case of this report, health and nursing. The supervised internship refers to the practical exercise of theoretical questions seized within the space of pedagogical preparation in undergraduate disciplines. This moment is supervised by a professor, responsible for the undergraduate course in which the internship takes place⁽⁶⁾. In the College of Nursing of Ribeirão Preto (EERP – Escola de Enfermagem de Ribeirão Preto), the PAE was standardized in 2007 and, in general, about 60 graduate students per semester perform supervised teaching internships in undergraduate disciplines of the unit. Given the PAE characteristics, postgraduate interns experience all teaching dimensions, assisting advisor professors in planning and developing activities and in the evaluation process of undergraduate students, as well as the discipline itself.

Given this scenario, this report aimed to analyze a professor training experience for in the health sector. It has appropriated aspects of the activity theory, incorporating benchmarks as “teaching activity”, “dialectic” and “sociohistorical building”, to deepen the analysis and discussion of the reported experience. It should be highlighted that the analytical category of the activity refers to a theoretical abstraction of every human practice, which has a sociohistorical character, able to transform people and expose their identities⁽²⁾.

OBJECTIVE

To analyze a professor training experience for higher education.

METHOD

This is a case report on the professor training process in postgraduate programs of the EERP/USP. This type of study can be considered a preliminary step to access the experience lived by professors, allowing a dive in the phenomenon of the teaching activity itself and in learning about it.

Data that subsidized the construction of the report were collected after the first semester of 2014, in an evaluative activity of the supervised teaching internship developed in that semesters. 21 graduate students participated in this activity who thought and discussed questions related to the internship experience and to ways of being a professor. An institutional record was elaborated at the end of the meeting by three graduate students in the group, and, specifically from this document, this study was elaborated. The organization of the evaluative activity adopted the active methodology. At first, the participants were divided in five groups

and discussed questions that highlighted the different main points regarding the dimensions of teaching and professor training, namely: 1) organizational dimension, 2) technical dimension, 3) didactic-pedagogical dimension, 4) dimension of professor-student relationships and 5) evaluative dimension. At a second moment, graduate students discussed aspects that were explored in small groups related to relevant knowledge necessary for the professor, to uncertainties and to the educational dynamism of higher educational, to the construction of teaching identity and its relation with undergraduate students and the figure of the advisor, evaluating reflectively the experience of the developed internship. The participation of graduate students in the activity was voluntary, and they were not identified. All ethical issues were observed in the development of this case report.

To extract the thematic categories, the final document of the evaluative teaching internship activity was subjected to thematic content analysis⁽⁷⁾. Thus, the data analysis involved three steps: 1) pre-analysis – floating reading, choice of the codes to be analyzed, formulation of objectives, determination of analysis indicators; 2) exploration of the material – definition of categories and identification of record units; and 3) treatment of the results, inference and interpretation – moment of intuition and reflective and critical analysis⁽⁷⁾. After this process, three thematic categories were identified that relate to the experience of postgraduate interns: 1) the need for knowledge on teaching practice; 2) the importance of immersion in teaching practices and routines; 3) the essentiality of mentoring.

RESULTS

The need for knowledge on teaching practice

The internship experience in the field of teaching becomes a moment of training and reflecting on the formation process within the scope of postgraduation itself and its requirements. In this sense, the first ideas and reflections expressed in the evaluative activity on being a professor were confronted with the demands inherent to the formation of a researcher who, as a rule, is the focus of postgraduate programs. From the graduate students' case reports, it was noticed that teaching practice requires knowledge on pedagogical strategies on the teaching-learning process and training context in postgraduation. The need for knowledge on learning strategies was one of the most pointed out topics by graduate students. In the discussions on evaluative activity, the graduate students reported that these strategies will be built along the professional practice and that clues on how to perform will be offered, but they should not be constrained or taken as absolute. Beliefs and conceptions about being a professor and their traditional responsibilities strictly aimed to the task of transmitting contents were, also, confronted with the demands of the practice (innovation, active methodologies and being responsible for disciplines) and of relationships with undergraduate students, requiring the production of new knowledge on what it is like to be a professor in contemporary times.

The importance of immersion in teaching practices and routines

Regarding the activities developed by the interns, experiences were reported in the whole process of undergraduate disciplines

in which graduate students performed. Experiences started by elaborating lesson plans, developing and evaluating content, attitudes and procedures. The immersion in every moment of the disciplines was one of the aspects that allowed to assess the PAE success, once graduate students, supervised, experienced all the steps inherent to the teaching practice. This type of practical experience of professional exercise is essential for constructing an identity, in this case, the professor identity. For many graduate students, being a professor was teaching contents, but it was discussed that this teaching identity is dynamic and in constant construction and transformation, especially when developed in the field of health with its demands and particularities. Another important point regarding the experience of graduate students refers to the relationship established with undergraduate students. The direct contact with them also compose the teaching routine and demanded from the interns the adoption of compatible postures with the function they performed in the internship (teaching). It was concluded that experience placed graduate students before difficulties typical of early teaching career, but in an experiential context in which they could count on support from the training institution and the advisors, a figure explored in the third category of this work.

The essentiality of mentoring

In PAE, professors responsible for undergraduate disciplines take on the role of advisor and tutors of graduate students. Generally, this professor does not only manage the development of undergraduate disciplines, but also guides postgraduate interns, answering questions, assessing postures and behaviors, and identifying difficulties related to the pedagogical management and practice. It was noticed that EERP/USP professors in this function place themselves as mediators in the human resources formation process for higher education, not indicating ready or correct answers, but stimulating graduate students to develop teaching skills, with freedom to create new ways to learn and teach. Through internship experience, a relation was sketched based on the constructive-collaborative model of formation, in which an action plan was developed involving professors and graduate students. In this teaching internship dimension, we realized that, to the graduate students, the advisor's opinion on each one's individual performance, that is, moments of feedback, were essential in the training process, since there was a need to support the developed activities and recognize in terms of what was appropriate and the difficulties of the professor's role in the classroom.

DISCUSSION

Professor training is still a complex topic with multiple facets due to the speed of knowledge expansion and scientific and technological innovations. This finding intensifies when we think on health professionals who, inserted in postgraduation programs, are confronted with the demands of exercising a "new profession": being a professor on one side, and answering educational demands on the other. Therefore, initially, the training in PAE internships of the EERP/USP, seeking to overcome instrumental knowledge, is realized in a sociohistorical context and assumes a character focused on the development

of competences related to the teaching practice, which require different and significant knowledges to the teaching process⁽⁶⁾. Not only knowledge regarding contents will be explored in the classroom by the professor, but also general knowledge about the craft of being a professor and the variables related to it (pedagogical strategies, teaching-learning process and training context, for example). It is in the configuration of professional identity that the professor goes from a simple “expert of the discipline” to a “professor of the discipline”, since it valorizes the link between teaching and learning, recognizing that, in addition to content, there are ways to make the appropriation process of them by the students possible⁽⁸⁾.

In addition to these knowledges, the immersion in practice seems to stimulate the construction of the teaching identity that is associated to the daily life of the professor, contradicting technical and instrumental views that only preparatory steps are capable of forming a professor. Still in the scenario of practice, communication and the contact with the figure of the advisor assured that the training dimensions were questioned and analyzed, as they are necessary to deal with different contents, situations and with undergraduate students.

From these findings, it is clear that the teaching activity, that is, the practical teaching performance, was considered the central point for training the graduate students involved in the reported experience. Following the perspective of the activity theory, the performance of teaching routine and practice can be considered the main activity able to promote qualitative changes in the professional development of professors in training⁽²⁾. A first approach of the teaching internship for higher education could suggest a process of organizing situations to trigger learning on what it means to be a professor. Meanwhile, it was observed that graduate students developed teaching activities that were built throughout the process and that helped them to understand the construction of teaching⁽⁹⁾. Actively, the interns found themselves faced with the need to solve a problem – what is it like being a professor? –, which required action strategies and plans – teaching organization – and involved necessary knowledge on teaching practice and lived experiences themselves – internship.

When the relevance that experience had in teaching routines and practices for the graduate students is observed, it can be inferred that a historical and cultural movement was stimulated, allowing access to produce the advisors’ “way of being a professor” regarding beliefs, experiences with other professors throughout the life cycle and the way of conceiving the professional performance itself, in addition to the awareness on a process to overcome conservative pedagogical practices (lessons strictly expository, for example). This overcoming does not only happen when one thinks about the use of different methodologies or technologies in the classroom as a professor. It is also embodied in the professor’s training process, gradually and in the midst of the movement of appropriating the teaching activity and its multiple facets^(2,4), such as the emphasis in active and practical methodologies that problematize daily questions of teaching in specific situations⁽⁶⁾.

In this perspective, the human activity is set not as an additive part of subjectivity, but as a central unit of people’s life. It is the understanding that the subjective reality is forged by the activity

and concrete reality⁽²⁾. From the point of view of the teaching activity explored in this study, it is possible to understand their senses and meanings, as fundamental data are presented to understand what motivates teaching activities of graduate students. For the activity theory, the reasons guide the personal meaning assigned to this activity, in interface with the social meaning that this activity has in certain historical and social moments^(2,8).

It is fundamental to analyze the development of the professor identity of graduate students through the experience of teaching organization, especially when we approach the training process of professors in the field of health^(1,3). This teaching organization requires other skills that are not related to the operation of daily professional practices such as nursing, medicine and psychology, for example. For the professionals of this field, it is difficult to conceive that teaching will be the main activity of their daily lives and, consequently, will be the motto for their professional and personal development and for their way of being in the world. Such perspective is complex, since, in general, by applying to a civil service examination for teaching in higher education in these areas, the development of teaching activities in an automation model is expected, as if it was a natural way of being a nurse and a professor in a Nursing undergraduate course, a doctor and Medicine professor, psychologist and professor of Psychology courses. It was found that this logic cannot be applied in the objective context of training, but it must excel by a dynamic sociohistorical formation⁽⁶⁾. In addition, we reiterate that the domain of knowledge and theories related to the field of education and the difficulty in recognizing and articulating it with specific knowledge are challenges and deserve emphasis in the practice of teaching in higher education

That way, we cannot ignore that training professors must incorporate in its pedagogical procedures theoretical discussion meetings (orientation to practice) and moments of practical internship (performance of knowledge built in training meetings)⁽²⁾. This is because theory and practice are articulated in Health teaching, which also involves two social practices: health and education. Teaching practice implies in dialect, through which the subjects appropriate of culturally built meanings (theory) and act through interventions in scenarios of reality (practice). This emphasis on dialectic removes the simplistic idea of experience, providing knowledge by itself, and values the building process that occurs in concrete contexts of reality⁽³⁾.

The evaluative activity developed with the graduate students allowed the problematization of the practice. This experience is essential not only for the professor in training, but also to those who are already practicing, to the extent that it allows reflecting on daily teaching life, particularly regarding situations experienced during teaching organization, in contact with students and in the classrooms⁽²⁾, emphasizing, thus, the value of the reflective experience for the professor. The professional who thinks his practice in light of theoretical contribution, either pedagogical or in terms of content, does not reproduce models or practices, but problematize possible paths to follow in the teaching practice (teaching identity building)⁽⁵⁾.

In this sense, the figure of the advisor and the relation with him/her were essential to facilitate the personal development of autonomy, creativity and, consequently, human resources for higher education, through creating reliable environments and

evaluation. Feelings such as insecurity and anguish, typical of the beginning of the professional practice, were softened through this relationship, which was, in most cases, based in the conception that the quality of teaching activities depended on the development of competences and potentials of being a professor under construction, such as knowledge and action modes, for example⁽¹⁰⁾. As observed, the preparation for the teaching practice in higher education is not a short or easy route⁽⁵⁾. In these terms, advising can be conceived as a complex PAE device that opened spaces in the training for listening, analyzing attitudes and stimulating transformations by confronting with the reality of classrooms and of undergraduate students. From the reports of graduate students, the internship was identified as an experimental moment in which the teaching activity is performed with the help and support of somebody, with the perspective that, in the future, this activity is developed only by the graduate student, and idea that approaches the concept of proximal zone of development⁽⁹⁻¹⁰⁾.

These formulations allow to indicate the potential of initiatives such as the PAE. A first finding in this direction refers to the apprehension that the participation in all the stages of an undergraduate discipline promoted the appropriation and the objectification of knowledges related to the teaching practice, which favored the subjective and professional development if graduate students when in contact with mediator political, theoretical and methodological aspects in the teaching and learning processes for higher education⁽⁶⁾. Practical teaching experience also revealed that being a professor is something that is in progress, under construction.

Training professors, especially for the field of Health, does not end in the university or in the conclusion of the different undergraduate courses, but is in constant development, requiring knowledge and support – such as the ones offered by the analyzed program – to be improved and to attend the teaching demands in the context of the university. In terms of challenges, we highlight that training professors requires problematizations capable to conceive teaching organization as an activity of the professor (work) and of the undergraduate student (study), and both are implied in their own development as a kind of participation in the process of the other⁽⁴⁾. There are indications that this understanding emerges among the graduate students that share the meaning of internship experiences, but these also indicated the need to reflect more and better on the professor training process, its values and programs, how the advisors experience it, the granting of scholarships to graduate students, and the socialization and broadening of the knowledge built within the scope of the actions in this program.

Limitations of the study

Despite the strengths of the study, we highlight that the methodological design – case report – constitutes a limitation.

This aspect precludes generalizable reflections, based in scientific evidences, on the complex professor training process. Even though this report was conducted in a USP unit (micro), it can represent a report that is lived in the entire PAE experience in an institutional level (macro), considering the multi-professional and interdisciplinary participation of MSc and PhD students from different professional fields (Nursing, Psychology, Biomedicine, Pedagogy, Physiotherapy, Biology etc.), inserted in disciplines of different knowledge areas in the field of health. The development of further studies is stimulated, with different methodological designs, to evaluate the Program and the experience of graduate students, as well as to present results based in investigative process organized by scientific accuracy. Reports of other professor training experiences of other universities and courses in the field of health are also recommended, so that one can understand how this process happens in different contexts and postgraduate Health and Nursing programs.

Contributions to the fields of health and nursing

This case report offers two contributions to the field: 1) the approach of the context and daily life of a training experience from the perspective of who is implied in the process (graduate students/professors in training); and 2) a critical analysis on the teaching activity as a fundamental category for building the professional identity and practice in the field of health. The ideas explored in this report indicate a more critical model of professor training, contextualized and according to the needs of graduate students, observations that can be better developed in the future.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The reported experience enabled a critical approach on the formation process of human resources for higher education in the field of Health, identifying potentials and challenges. Its innovative character resides in understanding formative pedagogical work articulated with moments of practical teaching performance. It was possible to identify the complexity of the training process proposed by the Teaching Improvement Program of the University of São Paulo, and the benefits that this type of initiative provides for the areas of health and nursing were discussed. At the same time, the critical analysis on the organization of teaching as a fundamental activity for building the teaching identity, and on the professional performance of professors, offers subsidies for other discussions and reflections, both in the pedagogical dimension of the question as within the scope of policies that encourage and stimulate professor training.

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