

# **Work and education: A comparative analysis of education policies for in-service teachers in Brazil and Mexico**

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## **Abstract**

Since the 1990s, Latin America has been the scene of numerous education reforms resulting from recommendations of international organizations, dictated by the neoliberal economic model. These reforms materialized basically in the establishment of assessment systems, the emphasis on continuing teacher education and the dissemination of information and communication technologies. In this article, we focus on the issue of continuing teacher education, aiming at identifying, characterizing and comparing current policies in Brazil and Mexico. We also analyze the strategies of their implementation, with special attention to the forms of appropriation of the proposals in both countries. In this comparative exercise, we start from the concept that, although under the same logic, the formative projects express different political and cultural contexts, as well as tensions, disputes and interests for their implementation. In this sense, it is true that they meet demands by placing the teacher as the center of their concerns. However, in general, this does not imply that teachers are considered subjects of political action in their education and teaching activities; on the contrary, they start from the principle that teachers lack elements to educate, which should be supplied in continuing education courses. Such courses, by focusing on certification (Brazil), or on obtaining scores for career advancement (Mexico), may result in further overwork. Nevertheless, teachers often invent forms of appropriation of these courses unforeseen by the public policies, building new meanings for their teaching.

## **Keywords**

In-service teacher – Continuing education – Latin America – Educational policy – Teaching.

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# ***Trabalho e formação: uma análise comparativa das políticas de formação de professores em serviço no Brasil e no México***

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## **Resumo**

*A partir dos anos 1990, a América Latina foi palco de inúmeras reformas educacionais, fruto de recomendações de organismos internacionais, ditadas pelo modelo econômico neoliberal. Essas reformas materializaram-se, basicamente, na constituição de sistemas de avaliação, na ênfase na formação continuada de professores e na disseminação de tecnologias de comunicação e informação. O presente artigo tem como recorte a formação continuada de professores, visando a identificar, caracterizar e comparar políticas em curso no Brasil e no México, bem como a analisar estratégias de sua implantação, com especial atenção para as formas de apropriação das referidas recomendações em cada um dos países. Nesse exercício comparativo, partimos da concepção de que, embora sob uma mesma lógica, os projetos formativos expressam distintas conjunturas políticas e culturais, bem como tensões, disputas e interesses em jogo para sua implementação. Nesse sentido, é verdade que elas atendem antigas reivindicações ao colocarem o professor como centro de suas preocupações. No entanto, em linhas gerais, isso não implica que o professor seja considerado como sujeito político da ação da formação e do fazer docente; ao contrário, parte-se do princípio de que ao docente faltam elementos para educar, que devem ser supridos em cursos de formação continuada. Esses, ao centrarem-se na certificação (Brasil), ou na obtenção de pontuação para progressão na carreira (México), podem resultar em mais um elemento de sobrecarga de trabalho. Ainda assim, muitas vezes os professores inventam formas de apropriação desses cursos não previstas pelas políticas, construindo novas significações para o trabalho docente.*

## **Palavras-chave**

*Formação de professores em serviço – Formação continuada – América Latina – Políticas educacionais – Trabalho docente.*

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Since the 1990s, Latin America has been the scene of numerous education reforms that met the demands not only for education expansion, but also for the adequacy of public education to the changes in the logic of capitalist regulation, given the diagnosis of the “system’s inefficiency”. A result of the recommendations of international organizations, dictated by the neoliberal economic model, and guided by and geared towards the market, these reforms sought to meet the historical demands of early childhood, primary and secondary education, such as quality and equity, emphasizing the need for innovation in schools and bringing the ideas of competence, effectiveness and decentralization into the center of the education policy. Such ideas have materialized basically from three pillars: the establishment of evaluation systems, the emphasis on continuing teacher education and the dissemination of information and communication technologies.

The growing influence of international agencies – particularly the World Bank – and the economic and instrumental logic behind their recommendations have given these reforms “a homogeneous and homogenizing character – both in the understanding of national realities and in their proposals, standardizing the education policy in the region” (KRAWCZYK; VIEIRA, 2006, p. 675). One can notice this uniformity in the General Laws of Education enacted in several countries in the region in the 1990s. In Paraguay and in the Dominican Republic, this occurred in 1992; in Argentina and Mexico, in 1993; in Colombia and Bolivia, in 1994; in Uruguay, in 1995; in Brazil, in 1996. The transition to the second decade of the millennium witnessed a second wave of reforms, which also resulted in new General Laws of Education in several countries. In Mexico, the ongoing reform leads to the enactment of a new law. In Brazil, even though its National Law has not changed, Decree 6094 of April 24, 2007, which regulates the implementation of the Goal Plan *Compromisso Todos pela Educação* [Commitment All for Education], establishes a new structure in the power relationship between the federal, state and municipal governments,

based on *Plano de Ações Articuladas* (PAR – Articulated Action Plan).

However, this does not mean that recommendations are grasped and materialized without nuances: albeit subject to the same standard, the reforms materialize in countries with different histories, which, therefore, give them local specificities.

In this work, we focus on the issue of continuing teacher education, in order to identify, characterize and compare current policies in Brazil with those in Mexico<sup>1</sup>. From the document analysis and interviews with researchers and educators, we have sought to examine strategies for the implementation of such policies, as well as forms of understanding them. In this comparative exercise, we start from the concept that, albeit under the same logic, formative projects express different political and cultural contexts, as well as tensions, disputes and interests in their implementation. We have given special attention to the changes that these policies have caused in teaching, since, as Bueno et al. (2012) state:

The multiplication of education courses for teachers of various levels, extension and modalities is one of the emphases of current policies, which have favored, through various consortia and partnerships, the increasing opening of private companies in a field which used to be reserved for State activity only. The worsening of the working conditions of teachers and the poor quality of many of these programs have intensified the debate between educators and researchers on this issue, among other reasons, because such measures lead to the questioning of policies on teacher professionalization and career

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development, as well as teachers working conditions. (BUENO et al., 2012, p. 3)

### **Brazil and Mexico: socioeconomic and educational landscape**

Although the emphasis on in-service teacher education has become one of the pillars of the reforms that have taken place in Latin America since the 1990s, it is necessary to reaffirm that, despite some similarities, the historical, political, economic and social contexts of each country in the region cannot be considered uniform. Based on this thought, we present below some socioeconomic and educational data from Brazil and Mexico, focusing on the consequences for teacher education. Despite being conjunctural, data also express historical contradictions and the conditions of the formulation of such policies.

Brazil is the most populous country in Latin America, with approximately 195,5 million inhabitants, one third of whom is aged less than 20 years. Mexico, on the other hand, has a significantly smaller and younger population, although it occupies the second place in number of inhabitants in Latin America: about 110.6 million, 40.6% of whom are aged under 20 years<sup>2</sup>.

At the turn of the first decade of the millennium, Mexico had higher development indexes than Brazil, as we see in the table below:

**Table 1** - Development indexes in Brazil and Mexico

Development	Brazil	México
Gross Domestic Product per capita (2012)	11.585	15.750
GINI* (2010)	0,559	0,481
Human development index (2011)	0,718	0,770
Position according to the Human Development Index in Latin America (2011)	11	5
Life expectancy at birth (2010-2015)	73.5 years	77.2 years
Infant mortality (under 1 year) (2009)	20‰	15‰

Source: Sistema de Información de Tendencias Educativas en América Latina (SITEAL)

\* Indicator of income inequality which varies from 0 to 1: it would be 0 if all the population had the same income, and it would be 1 if only one person owned the whole country's wealth.

**2-** Source: Sistema de Información de Tendencias Educativas en América Latina (SITEAL).

However, these numbers do not translate into better living conditions for the majority of the Mexican population. In 2010, according to data published by Sistema de Información de Tendencias Educativas en América Latina (SITEAL – System of Information on Educational Trends in Latin America), 36.3% of Mexicans were below the poverty line (compared to 20.9% in Brazil) and 13.3% were below the indigence line (6.1% in Brazil). Regarding employment status, although Mexico had one of the lowest unemployment rates<sup>3</sup> in Latin America, only higher than those of Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Dominican Republic, and Venezuela, most Mexican workers were trapped in informal and/or precarious work:

**Table 2** - Working conditions in Brazil and Mexico

Labor situation (2010-2011)	Brazil	Mexico
Unemployment rate	7.4%	6.0%
Workers in the informal sector	18.3%	40.0%
Precarious workers	22.3%	59.7%

Source: Sistema de Información de Tendencias Educativas en América Latina (SITEAL)

The extent of informal employment in Mexico is an important element to be taken into account in the study on teacher education policies. With work experience marked by precariousness, teaching work appears as a possibility to enter and remain in the formal labor market, and despite low wages, it means the possibility of social mobility for a considerable portion of the population. This is the status that most of the 1.2 million<sup>4</sup> early childhood, primary and secondary education teachers enjoy in Mexico (In Brazil, there are about 2 million<sup>5</sup>).

Despite having shown some improvement in the last decades – with the universalization of primary education and progressive growth in

**3-** Unemployment rate (open unemployment): percentage of people with no occupation in relation to economically active population.

**4-** Data from 2010. Source: Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP).

**5-** Data from 2010. Source: Ministério da Educação/Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (MEC/INEP).

the population's educational level –, the indexes related to schooling in both countries express the problems of the education national systems since their configuration. It is not our intention to reduce the analysis of an educational reality to rankings and abstract numbers. Nevertheless, these indexes help us have an overview of the extent of the challenges that teachers and students face every day.

**Table 3 -** Main education indicators in Brazil and Mexico

Education Indicators (2010-2011)	Brazil	Mexico
Schooling rate (5 to 24 years)	71.4%	69.9%
Net rate* of primary schooling	87.2%	95.9%
Net rate of secondary schooling	76.6%	71.9%
Students with 2 or more years of school delay	6.0%	7.4%
Illiteracy in the population aged 15 years or more	8.6%	7.2%
15-year-old adolescents in primary education	13%	1%
11-year-old unschooled children	1%	2%
17-year-old unschooled adolescents	27%	42%
17-year-old adolescents who dropped primary education	6%	10%
Position at PISA** (2012)	58	53
Percentage of Gross Domestic Product destined to education	5.2% (2009)	3.8% (2010)

Source: Sistema de Información de Tendencias Educativas en América Latina (SITEAL)

Source: OCDE/PISA

\* The net rate of schooling expresses to what extent the population, who, according to their age should be attending a certain level of schooling, has actually been schooled up to that level.

\*\* Program for International Student Assessment.

First of all, it is very important to emphasize that the data above do not consider the vast regional disparities in Mexico and Brazil. For instance, the illiteracy rate in Mexico ranges from less than 2.5% (in the Northern states and the Federal District) to almost 19% in the poorer states with a large presence of indigenous population<sup>6</sup>. The situation is similar in Brazil, where the rate varies from 3% in some Southern and Southeastern states, and in the Federal District, to around 20% in the Northeastern states<sup>7</sup>.

**6-** Source: SEP, 2009 Data.

**7-** Data from 2011. Source: Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, Ipea.

Secondly, it is also important to point out that sometimes percentiles hide harsh realities. Even though we are aware of recent educational achievements, the reality is that the school trajectories of many Mexican and Brazilian children and adolescents are full of obstacles. Although the entry into formal education is assured, the right to education is not guaranteed because they are affected by failures and exclusion from school before completing basic education<sup>8</sup>, or by staying in school without receiving effective education. These children and adolescents often fall prey to a new form of exclusion, not detectable by statistical indices: a subtle exclusion, because it is slow, gradual, almost imperceptible, in which students do remain in school and do move from one grade to another, but do not actually receive solid education, which results in what Bourdieu (1997) calls “relative educational failure.”

Based on the complexity of this framework, we turn our eyes to in-service teacher education policies in Mexico and Brazil.

### Continuing teacher education policies in Brazil

In the case of Brazil, the emphasis on continuing teacher education which has structured the education policy since the 1990s has as its fundamental objective professionalization and certification in higher education. Providing teachers in service with mass training in higher education institutions within the shortest possible time was the basis of a series of programs implemented in several states and municipalities.

Based on international agreements funded mainly by the World Bank, Brazil, as well as other Latin American countries, began a crusade for teacher education. In Brazil, a large portion of teachers had completed only secondary education and part of them were lay teachers. But the Brazilian goal – to provide teachers with higher education in 10 years

**8-** Translator's note: In Brazil and Mexico, the term *basic education* encompasses early childhood, primary and secondary education.

– was not reached, and the period for such training has thus been extended.

According to Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional (LDBEN – Law of Guidelines and Bases for National Education) of 1996, this training should be provided by municipalities and states, according to the constitutional logic of decentralization of power, and a series of norms and the creation of support funds would be necessary so as to distribute minimally resources for its completion<sup>9</sup>, among other measures (KRAWCZYK, 2005). Nevertheless, studies of Brazilian and Latin American authors have pointed out that the process of decentralization has happened a lot more in administrative aspects which delegate to states, municipalities and schools the responsibilities for managing actions and resources, and that the decision power over policies and evaluation mechanisms has been kept by national governments (KRAWCZYK; VIEIRA, 2006).

For these authors, decentralization has a specific meaning in the Brazilian case: the national regulation of a variety of systems which have shaped public education since the early twentieth century. The presence of the Ministry of Education of Brazil before the federated entities is officially established through the implementation of Goal Plan Compromisso Todos pela Educação [Commitment All for Education], (BRASIL, 2007). The purpose of this agreement between the federal government, states, municipalities, and the community is “to promote social mobilization to improve the quality of early childhood, primary and secondary education by means of programs and actions for financial and technical assistance” (BRASIL, 2007).

The document emphasizes the importance of teacher education, and delegates to states and municipalities the task of “establishing programs

of their own or in collaboration for the initial and continuing education of professionals of education”. The evaluation of the effectiveness of the Goal Plan will be measured by the Educational Development Index, officially defined in that Decree, and by the establishment of Plano de Ações Articuladas (PAR - Linked Action Plan), which highlights the realization of agreements between states and municipalities with the Federation, by means of technical support by the Ministry of Education.

The structural conditions were launched for the expansion of the continuing teacher education system, which materialized in Brazilian states and municipalities aiming at mass training in a short period of time. It is estimated that more than 100,000 teachers received academic titles in these programs. But how does this expansion occur?

Bello’s analysis (2008) suggests that continuing education policies express trends in discussions of education in Brazil by means of abstract educational conceptions such as reflective-teacher, researcher-teacher, autonomous teacher, mediator of differences. Moreover, the nuclear axis of the education programs focuses on the acquisition of competences and abilities, aiming to enable the teacher to use new technologies, to work on differences, to encourage autonomy and *learning to learn*<sup>10</sup>, in line with conceptions of learning which reflect neoliberal models dictated internationally by Jacques Delors Report (1996).

According to Bello (2008, p. 75),

Brazil promoted primarily the higher certification of its teachers of early childhood education and the early years of primary education by means of a model of in-service education organized through the partnership between public and private higher education institutions, state departments of education and municipalities. It was taught by various

**9-** Fundo de Manutenção e Desenvolvimento do Ensino Fundamental e de Valorização do Magistério (FUNDEF – Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Primary Education and Valorization of Teachers), 1996; and Fundo de Manutenção e Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica e de Valorização dos Profissionais da Educação (FUNDEB – Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary Education and Enhancement of Professional Education), 2006.

**10-** Cf. Duarte, 2012.

educational agents (thus, fragmenting the functions that were traditionally performed by a single person) and it was normally conducted outside universities. It is a model that relied on standardized textbooks and was offered mainly in modules. It certified a large mass of teachers in shorter time than traditional undergraduate programs and sought to use technological resources [...], even though many of these technological intentions have remained only on paper, given the lack of technical and financial resources.

To accomplish this task, programs of continuing education used various training modalities, supported mainly by interactive media called Information and Communication Technologies – ICT. Through them, some of the educational agents teach face to face classes to student teachers, acting as tutors, study advisors and class teachers. But most of the agents operate virtually through videoconferences, teleconferences, learning spaces, whose work is based on printed booklets.

Another significant portion of teacher education is conducted in distance mode, institutionalized via the establishment of Universidade Virtual Pública do Brasil (UniRede – Public Virtual University of Brazil) in 1999. The consortium formed by several Brazilian public universities which aims to “study, develop, suggest, encourage and support national and regional education policies for expansion and improvement of distance education in Brazil through funding agencies, based on discussions with their associates” (BRASIL, 1999). In this training, tutors and facilitators help in-service teachers interact with technological resources and learning material, which is produced by university professors. Therefore, the extent of this teacher education modality has increasingly grown in both the public sector and the private one, often in partnership with the public sector. Having a temporary and occasional nature to meet local or regional needs, education courses are seen as a product to be marketed,

which institutes a market in which all forms of education and the extension to various social segments come to be valued.

### **Continuing teacher education policies in Mexico**

In Mexico, the teaching profession is considered a *profession of State*. Therefore, the State governs the whole process of teacher education, whether initial or continuing. The State defines the curricula, programs and teaching plans of normal schools, institutions responsible for initial teacher education, which has been conducted at higher education level since 1984 (SANDOVAL, 2007). As it occurred in many Latin American countries in the 1990s, in Mexico, a policy of education decentralization was also implemented, which was called *new educational federalism*. However, this decentralization appears to have occurred more in the field of execution, which became the responsibility of the states, since the federal government has remained responsible for planning, regulation, control, and evaluation of policies, including initial and continuing teacher education policies (ORNELAS, 2010).

Furthermore, there is a real separation between instances of initial and continuing education within Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP – Public Education Department), which seems to follow political rather than educational criteria. Until the 1990s, continuing education was not a priority in the Mexican education policies. During much of the twentieth century, education policies had, to a great extent, a character of academic leveling, that is, they offered the equivalent of initial education for teachers who were already in service, but who lacked education for this (first to those who had no secondary education, and, since 1984, to those who had no higher education). In the early 1990s, in response to the demand from Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE – National Union of Education Workers) for teacher professionalization

(ROSALES, 2009), and based on international discussions and recommendations of multilateral bodies, Mexico produced *Acuerdo Nacional para la Modernización de la Educación Básica* (National Agreement for the Modernization of Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary Education). In this agreement, among other things, there was a proposal for a curriculum reform and teacher appreciation, which was translated into *Programa Nacional de Actualización Permanente de los Maestros de Educación Básica en Servicio* (PRONAP – National Program of Permanent Updating for Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary Teachers in Service), implemented in 1995, and into the configuration of a teaching career whose progress was defined by a scoring system for the activities carried out by teachers.

The continuing education courses were proposed and implemented by state departments of education, under the seal of SEP. The professionals involved in the education programs were professionals of state departments themselves, often teachers commissioned as trainers. Despite the emphasis on continuing education through courses which often failed to result in effective improvement of the quality of Mexican education – on the contrary, they led to overwork of the teacher who wished to get the score to progress in the teaching career – and the unequal realization of the program in the states of the federation, PRONAP was considered a watershed in education policies for teachers in service.

In May 2008, *Alianza por la Calidad de la Educación* (ACE – Alliance for Quality Education) was announced. This is a basic document of a new education reform launched by Felipe Calderón government (2006-2012), signed by SEP and SNTE. The document increases the determination of the Mexican education policies by the neoliberal model and proposes, among other things: the modernization of school units, including the participation of the private sector; changes in the teaching career, according to which many of the scores of teachers start to

be defined by the outcome of their students in the national and international standardized assessments; curriculum and textbook reforms (SEP, 2008). It also proposes the emphasis on teacher professionalization, by creating a new in-service education program, *Sistema Nacional de Formación Continua y Superación Profesional de Maestros en Servicio* (SFCSP – National System of Continuing Education and Professional Improvement of In-Service Teachers).

In SFCSP, the following model remains: continuing education based on courses offered to teachers and on the pedagogy of competences. The assumption is that it is necessary to provide teachers with the content they lack to perform their educational task satisfactorily. During every school year, there is a call for the institutions which wish to offer their proposed courses – universities and other public or private higher education institutions, research centers, technical education institutions, civil society organizations, businesses, etc. Such proposals are evaluated by a committee of experts appointed by SEP, and results are published on National Catalogs with the courses selected. State departments of education elect those which pertain to their state and make them available to school professionals – teachers, principals and staff.

The new continuing education policy has been examined by researchers who focus on this issue, and who criticize a) the fact that the policy was designed and implemented vertically by the SEP and SNTE, without the social participation needed for the success of the program; b) the total separation of continuing education from initial one; c) the concept of continuing education based on academic content, which dispenses with the experience of teachers; d) the abstract character of the document that regulates the policy, and which does not distinguish priorities or forecast short, medium or long-term actions (MERCADO, 2008). But the fiercest criticism to SFCSP is that this system promotes the entry of private entrepreneurship in continuing



education and the transfer of public funds to private institutions.

Despite the prominent role that continuing education has gained in recent decades, the new model increases the individual accountability of the teacher for the educational ills and encourages the privatization of teacher education. In other words, the continuing education policy and the reform that supports it have elements in common with the education policies of other Latin American countries: the implementation of policies from top to bottom; the emphasis on standardized assessment

of students and teachers; the individual accountability of students and teachers for the negative results of these assessments; the processes of privatization of public education at various levels and spheres.

### **In-service teacher education in Brazil and Mexico: comparison exercises**

The study on the policy for in-service teacher education allows us to draw the following comparison table:

**Table 1 - Comparison of policies of in-service teacher education in Brazil and Mexico**

Since the 1990s	BRAZIL	MEXICO
General Law of Education	1996	1993/in transition to a new law
Decentralization processes	Division of responsibility for education levels between municipal, state and federal government, including their funding	Decentralization of policy implementation, given that its planning, financing and evaluation continue to be the federal government's responsibility
Continuing education programs	Multiple. State, municipal and local ones.	National. PRONAP (1993-2009) SFCSP (2009-2012)
Certification of teachers in higher education	Yes	No. They already had the titles.
Institutions responsible for in-service teacher education	Mainly universities, mostly public ones.	Until 2009: state departments of education. Since 2009: public and private universities, departments of education, companies, NGOs.
Emphasis on the use of distance education/TIC	Yes	No

Even though decentralization is the keynote of the education reforms that have taken place in Latin American countries in the 1990s, including Brazil and Mexico, the way it is conducted is not homogeneous. It is true that, in general, decentralization processes have had clear financial goals, linked to the fiscal crisis which affected the region, and which resulted in the adoption of the management model of the education system and in the market logic (KRAWCZYK; VIEIRA, 2006). But this does not necessarily imply the weakening of the State power to play the its role as the provider of public education.

In Brazil, although its education system is characterized by a multiplicity of systems

and education policies, there is a process of recentralization of power by means of a set of norms established by the federal government. In Mexico, the decentralization process is fraught with ambiguity: on the one hand, the transfer of responsibilities to the states was real, but, on the other hand, there has been a concentration of powers in SEP, resulting in “constant tension between the federalization praised by the government (as decentralization is called) and bureaucratic centralism, which is the dominant trend” (ORNELAS, 2010, p. 20).

In-service education policies in both countries in the past decades have principles in common. Actually, policies are not upgrade and innovation policies – as publicized in the

documents of international organizations – but compensatory programs (GATTI, 2008): through continuing education, one intends to supply a deficiency in initial teacher education. In that sense, there are mixed intentions: one starts from a discourse that emphasizes the need for teachers to be provided with the new knowledge needed to cope with the demands of the globalized world and of the children who come to school in this new context, and, later, concludes that the main cause of the poor quality of education systems, both in Brazil and Mexico, is the poor initial education of teachers. The solution, then, would be to provide teachers, who have deficiencies, with content and teaching methods and to familiarize them with the new teaching languages and technologies, by promoting courses based on the theoretical and methodological framework of the pedagogy of competences. It is noteworthy that this approach contains the tacit affirmation of teachers' incompetence to work in schools.

In this sense, although in-service education policies in Brazil and Mexico meet old demands by placing teachers at the center of their concerns, this does not mean that teachers are regarded as political subjects of the action of training and teaching practice. On the contrary, the argument of incompetence justifies the construction of policies for teachers by others, all sorts of specialists, whose mission is to contribute to the resolution of education problems by performing analysis *on teachers* and formulating policies *for teachers*, but not *with teachers*.

However, the establishment of continuing education programs rooted in the teaching of competences and the implicit argument of teacher incompetence is what generally characterizes other Latin American policies. It is part of the *package* encouraged by international organizations. This theoretical and methodological choice is not neutral; on the contrary, it has clear implications in terms of the understanding of the underlying role of education: an education geared towards

the interests of the productive world, which promotes a subject in line with these needs – the “competent” one (KUENZER, 2002). Such reductionism transforms the educational issue, in its multiple determinants, into an individual matter of teacher competence or incompetence. Souza (2006), when analyzing in-service education policies in Brazil, points out the simplification that underlies them and the consequences for both the direct participants of the education system (especially teachers and students) and for the academic debate:

The way it [the argument of competence] was appropriated by the education policies and their action of in-service education brought into the focus of attention *more the teachers and less the schools and the education system*. Those who define education policies and develop education programs seem to borrow from the world of academic literature only the most convenient ideas and analysis, which will be more politically advantageous to them, typically those which help developing actions of greater visibility to the general public, for the benefit of the government of the day. The academic debate is simplified to favor particular, more practical and prescriptive forms. And such forms proposed investing in continuing teacher education programs as a panacea for all school ills, instead of defining and implementing education policies and proposals for continuing education to improve the general conditions of work in schools (SOUZA, p. 2006, p. 485, italics by the author).

This rather reductionist understanding of educational ills is historical rather than just conjunctural. Patto (1991), by analyzing the explanations for school failure, shows the strength of the individualizing bias, which throughout history has blamed students and their families, and then teachers, for the ills of formal education. Explanations gain new

meanings when they are updated in in-service education policies: in the case of Mexico, they disseminate the discrediting of teachers and support the intentions to privatize public education. In the case of Brazil, they result in the weakening of teachers' organizations of collective struggles. In the words of Freitas (2003, p. 1108):

the logic of competences, by emphasizing the individualization of education processes and the individual accountability for professional development, result in teachers' moving away from their professional category as a collective and, consequently, from their organizations.

Moreover, in-service education policies based on promoting courses aimed at filling education gaps, and which simultaneously seek to transform the professional situation of teachers – in the case of Brazil, with the certification in higher education; in the case of Mexico, through the score for the teaching career – can result in one more factor of work overload. Teachers are compelled to attend a number of courses which often fail to make sense in their educational paths and fail to result in the effective improvement of teaching and learning conditions.

Yet, many teachers invent ways of appropriating these courses which have not been anticipated by the policies, constructing new meanings for teaching work. Teachers seek – and build – other forms of participation in continuing education courses. In the face of pre-established content with little relevance, teachers create new meanings for their passage through these courses. Perhaps the most important of them is the construction of spaces where they can share their work, school life, and teaching experience. Teachers make use of practical astuteness and make up courses that, in principle, do not exist. By doing so, they send out a message to those who focus on the theme of in-service education: the opposition to a policy that disregards the

teaching experience and that assumes that teachers lack competences.

## **Final remarks**

The education reforms that have swept Latin America since the 1990s aimed to promote a process of homogenization in their education systems. However, such reforms have not been sufficient to eliminate their historical heterogeneity. The same recommendations from international bodies are appropriated in different ways, which implies a character that is both homogeneous and heterogeneous in education policies of the countries in the region. In this sense, the ways in which the national education systems are configured entail considerable differences in in-service education policies: the promotion of various national, state, municipal and local programs in the case of Brazil; a national policy, in the case of Mexico. A policy geared towards mass certification, in the case of Brazil; a policy to restructure the teaching career, in the case of Mexico. Teacher education based on courses that prioritize the use of education technologies and distance education, in the case of Brazil; teacher education based on courses promoted by state departments of education, universities and enterprises, in the case of Mexico.

However, this diversity of policies is grounded in a similar conception of teacher education: a strictly technical-instrumental education, based on content and *competences*. A conception that removes the political character of education and of teacher practice. In it, there is room not for teachers to be subjects of their own education process, but, rather, for teachers deemed incompetent, whose deficiencies should be addressed. The in-service education policies of compensatory nature authorized in both countries, grounded on promoting courses based on the *pedagogy of competences* are consonant with this conception. However, more than compensating for the alleged lack of education of teachers, these courses seem to entail work overload.

In both countries, teachers are considered responsible for the ills that have long permeated their education systems, and which are now translated into lower positions in international rankings, such as PISA, and into poor results in their own universal assessment systems, which are used exhaustively, in accordance with the recommendations of international bodies.

In this sense, the configuration of in-service education policies based on courses and modeled on concepts that discredit teachers seem to meet the interests of commercial nature, aimed at building a training market (SOUZA; SARTI, 2013). In the case of Brazil, the models of in-service education built by public universities have been appropriated and transformed by a range of private institutions, which offer all sorts of distance learning courses,

at a low cost, to teachers of public systems, who become individually responsible for their continuing education process. In Mexico, it is the federal policy itself that establishes the distribution of teacher education courses to private institutions and that transfers public resources to them. In both countries, the privatizing transformation operates.

Paraphrasing Paulo Freire (2005), we can say that “teacher education is a political act” and we believe that, in the wake of neoliberal policies, this condition has generally been instrumentalized in the various training conceptions and methods present. Involving the teacher as a political subject of the teacher education action and the teaching practice is a great challenge to be faced to improve the quality of early childhood, primary and secondary education.

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