

Sometimes, learning requires more attention and less intention: Possibilities and limits of teacher training in Sociology

Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss the limits and possibilities of teacher training in Sociology. To do so, we analyze two specific events that took place between November 2022 and April 2024, in the Programa de Residência Pedagógica (PRP) in Sociology at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). The PRP was a public policy initiative for teacher preparation that placed undergraduate teaching students in public schools through the provision of a stipend. The conclusions of the study of these two cases suggest that learning to teach connects personal experience and social context, and is shaped by attention to the practical dilemmas of everyday school life, sometimes as much or more than by pedagogical intent.

Keywords: School Sociology; Teaching Sociology; Teacher Training; Sociological Craftsmanship; Education of Attention.

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Introduction

The field of “School Sociology” or “Teaching Sociology” encompasses a community of professionals dedicated to fostering, researching, or applying Social Sciences knowledge in basic education (Mocelin, 2020, p. 57). Therefore, teacher training in Sociology integrates university-level education with schools, within the context of your knowledge production and dissemination. Considering that teaching degrees are privileged spaces for teacher training in Brazil, teaching initiation

scholarship projects are often closely aligned with public policies aimed at schooling (Oliveira, 2020, p. 152).

Recent advances in Sociology teaching in Basic Education have occurred alongside the expansion of undergraduate and graduate programs, the inclusion of the subject in the Programa Nacional do Livro Didático (PNLD)¹, and the dissemination of teacher training policies. With the advent of the Novo Ensino Médio² (NEM) and the Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC)³, Sociology lost its status as a mandatory subject, which had been secured since 2008, and its new place within the “Humanities and Applied Social Sciences” area still sparks heated debates. Even so, there has been a consolidation of institutional spaces dedicated to research, such as academic events, scientific journals, and collective organizations, while the process of establishing Sociology in the school curriculum continues to be significant (Oliveira; Cigales, 2019).

Teacher training in Social Sciences has historically encountered a predominantly academic focus in undergraduate courses, with teaching degrees being the main spaces for practical professional learning (Oliveira; Ferreira, 2016). The Programa de Residência Pedagógica (PRP)⁴ was a public policy aimed at teacher training, executed by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES)⁵. The objectives of the PRP included enhancing the initial training of teachers by providing practical experiences in schools for undergraduate students. Furthermore, it sought to promote the integration of teaching theory and practice, contributing to the improvement of basic education quality and stimulating interest in the profession.

The PRP encouraged exchanges between different educational institutions by integrating undergraduate students who had completed 50% of their coursework or were in their fifth semester into the school context. The project’s structure included

¹ National Textbook Program (<https://www.gov.br/fnde/pt-br/aceso-a-informacao/acoes-e-programas/programas/programas-do-livro>). Accessed October 11, 2024.

² New High School (<https://www.gov.br/mec/pt-br/novo-ensino-medio-descontinuado>). Accessed October 11, 2024.

³ Common National Curriculum Base (<http://portal.mec.gov.br/conselho-nacional-de-educacao/base-nacional-comum-curricular-bncc>). Accessed October 11, 2024.

⁴ Pedagogical Residency Program (<https://www.gov.br/capes/pt-br/aceso-a-informacao/acoes-e-programas/educacao-basica/programas-encerrados/programa-residencia-pedagogica>). Accessed October 11, 2024.

⁵ Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (<https://www.gov.br/capes/pt-br>). Accessed October 11, 2024.

various agents, with each subproject involving resident scholarship holders, mentor teachers in schools, and faculty advisors at the university. The presence of resident scholarship holders in schools entailed observing Sociology classes, analyzing Teaching Plans, Lesson Plans, textbooks, and educational materials, as well as producing and leading activities such as workshops and lessons. In the PRP in Sociology at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)⁶ we worked with 15 resident scholarship students in three public schools in Porto Alegre (RS), from November 2022 to April 2024.

Based on the analysis of two specific events that occurred during our work, this article aims to discuss the limits and possibilities of academic teacher training and its relationship with institutional teaching initiation scholarship programs. Drawing on Charles Wright Mills' concept of sociological craftsmanship and Tim Ingold's anthropology of education, I argue that learning to teach intertwines personal experience and social context, and is shaped by attention to the practical dilemmas of everyday school life as much as, if not more than, the pedagogical intentions of teacher education programs.

1. Between the university and the school

Teacher training involves a "teacher knowledge" that manifests through continuous interactions between teachers' identities (including their emotions, cognition, expectations, and personal histories) and their pedagogical practices. The being and acting of teachers are interdependent and dynamic aspects within the school process (Tardif, 2014, p. 16). In Brazil, the training of Sociology teachers has seen considerable expansion over the past decade, even though teachers from other disciplines still teach Sociology in schools (Oliveira, 2015, p. 58). The precariousness of the teaching profession and the saturation of the job market are also significant issues affecting Sociology teacher education in the country (Costa, 2015, p. 199).

The initial teacher training in sociology can be seen as a privileged place for the Social Sciences to closely understand the school environment (Oliveira & Cigales, 2020,

⁶ Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (<http://www.ufrgs.br>). Accessed October 11, 2024.

p. 196). When we began the activities of the PRP in Sociology at UFRGS, as the faculty advisor of the project, I presented the resident scholarship holders with a Work Plan for the entire 18-month period, anchored in denaturalization and estrangement of social relations, two fundamental perspectives of sociological teaching (Moraes, 2020, p. 260). Working in three public schools in the city of Porto Alegre (RS), two state-run and one federal, I suggested we operate based on the following pillars: (1) diagnosing the profile of those involved in the school's daily life and the didactic-pedagogical activities conducted in Sociology classes; (2) planning activities to be carried out by the resident scholarship holders; (3) executing the planned activities; (4) evaluating the entire process, from diagnosis, through planning, and culminating in execution. Additionally, I requested observation reports of school events through descriptive and reflective field diaries, submitted monthly and discussed in bi-weekly meetings with the presence of all resident scholarship holders.

Each participant in the PRP Sociology at UFRGS signed a commitment agreement upon joining the program, pledging to adhere to ethical standards of conduct and to produce and make available data derived from their activities. The observation diaries written by the resident scholarship holders included personal reflections and descriptions of school events. Their contents were discussed in collective meetings, analyzed, and connected with other experiences, concepts, and sociological theories. In addition to the diaries, we produced lesson plans, workshops, teaching materials, presentations at academic conferences, articles for books and scientific journals, and university extension activities.

The three public schools where the 15 resident scholarship holders were placed have distinct characteristics. All are located in Porto Alegre (RS), one in the far east of the city, and two in the central region. Two of the educational institutions are maintained by the Secretaria da Educação do Rio Grande do Sul (SEDUC/RS)⁷. One is a technical school offering high school and integrated technical courses, and the other offers only regular high school education. The third school is maintained by the

⁷ Department of Education of Rio Grande do Sul (<https://educacao.rs.gov.br/inicial>). Accessed October 11, 2024.

federal government, providing elementary, secondary, and adult education (EJA). All three mentor teachers who received the resident scholarship holders from the PRP in Sociology at UFRGS held degrees in Social Sciences and taught Sociology in high school, as well as other subjects in the curriculum.

The records required from the resident scholarship holders were conceived from the methodological perspective of participant observation. In line with Ingold's (2016) approach, participant observation emphasizes continuous immersion in the territories being studied, allowing for a deeper understanding of ongoing cultural processes. In this sense, participant observation offers the possibility of more horizontal and collaborative relationships between researchers and those being studied. Knowledge is an emergent process that happens through active participation and ongoing interaction with the environment and people (Ingold, 2016, p. 407). Considering our work in schools, which was not limited to observing everyday events but also involved planning and conducting lessons and other activities, a less detached and more participatory stance in the school context seemed to align well with our goals.

2 Sociological craftsmanship and sociological imagination

Faced with the constant emergence of the subjectivities of basic education students and the resident scholarship holders themselves, making a problematic axis in the routine of school relationships, with personal experiences constantly intertwining with structural issues, the notion of "sociological imagination" proposed by Mills (1982) helped to underpin some of our actions. We seek to develop a qualified view of ourselves and the world, to perceive lucidly and use the information that crosses our path in dialogue with scientific rationality. Our approach was to locate the individual events of students and schools in the broader historical and social context, allowing understanding how people, in the daily turmoil of their lives, often paid little attention to the structural aspects interacting with their existence (Mills, 1982, p. 11).

I selected two specific events to articulate with the theoretical reflexivity we exercise. The two events that I analyze here were the subject of presentations at scientific meetings by some resident scholarship holders in 2023 e 2024. The case of the school that went a month and a half without electricity in the first semester of

2023, due to the theft of the cables supplying its power, serves well as the first illustration of the horizon we adopted. The lack of electricity created an extremely sad and discouraging environment for both the teaching staff and the students. After more than a month without any prospects of resolving the issue, the extreme exhaustion of the teachers was evident, as was the students' fatigue, along with the sadness of seeing a space they attended every day being practically abandoned by the responsible institutions.

This episode deeply affected the school community and the resident scholarship holders working at this institution, as classroom distraction and dropout rates became major issues. It became even more difficult to capture students' attention during lessons, and the lack of attendance among students at the school without electricity increased significantly. Beyond hindering the development of subject content, the absence of electricity also greatly impacted student retention. On the other hand, the mentor teacher's ability to engage with the students who continued attending classes was noticeable. In response to the disinterest, she interacted with the students' concerns, fostering a sense of closeness and improving communication, which often led to discussions related to the topics covered in class.

While it is true that problems existed before the theft of the electrical cables, the rearrangement of school activities – restricted to daylight hours when sunlight illuminated the premises – made it even more difficult to engage students in the didactic practices proposed by the mentor teacher and the resident scholarship students. This severely diminished the enthusiasm of all those involved in the school. It became very challenging to maintain lessons when fewer than five students attended at a time, and even those five students varied from class to class. In a lesson on stratification and social classes, for example, there was noticeable disengagement near the end of the session. Despite the teacher's dedicated efforts and some success in capturing attention, two students were asleep at the back of the room.

Even though the individual experiences of student dispersion and disinterest are not an absolute reflection of structural occurrences, such as the theft of electrical cables from an institution, they demonstrate the dialectic between historical and social phenomena and the limitations of individual agency. For an individual to understand their personal existence, to evaluate their particular destiny, they must

situate themselves in the historical and social period in which they live (Mills, 1982, p. 12). One can only know their possibilities if they become aware of the possibilities of all other individuals who live under the same circumstances as they do. Every person lives within a society; lives their own biography; lives a historical sequence. Therefore, every person contributes, more or less, to conditioning that society, to the development of History. At the same time, every person is conditioned by society and by the historical processes in which they are involved.

For sociological imagination, three interconnected questions are fundamental: (1) What is the overall structure of the society under investigation? (2) What is the position of this society in human history, how does it differ from others, and what are its characteristics? (3) What variety of people is predominant in the society analyzed and in its historical period? I suggested to the resident scholarship holders that they incorporate these questions into their daily reflections, considering topics such as Western modernity, neoliberal rationality, social inequalities, identities, the Novo Ensino Médio⁸, precarious teaching working conditions, etc. In this direction, sociological imagination promotes an important distinction between “personal troubles” and “public issues of social structure” (Mills, 1982, p. 14). Personal troubles relate to the “self” and its immediate relationships with others (its direct awareness). Public issues transcend the intimate life of the individual because they are connected to various small spheres of social life that interpenetrate, forming the social and historical structure.

The sociological imagination advocated by Mills asserts that individual social scientists should consider their scientific work as a craft. To do so, we must not separate our intellectual work from our own lives. Good intellectual work requires learning to continuously use life experiences in our craft. Craftsmanship is at the core of the artisan, is at the core of the work of social scientists. Artisans of ideas are personally involved in every sociological process they engage in. Their past experiences guide their present and define the horizons of their future experiences. Social scientists need to learn to control this quite complex interaction and they need

⁸ New High School: in Brazil, in 2017, there was a high school reform that excluded various subjects and was understood by many authors as a reform that exacerbates the existing inequalities in the country's education system.

to learn to manage it in their reflections. We have sought to exercise this craftsmanship as the substrate of our activities in schools. We understand that the experiences emerging from these territories, through the participatory observation of resident scholarship holders, connect social structure and biography.

Another relevant occurrence that caused discomfort to the resident scholarship holders was related to classes on gender issues, held at another state school where we work. It was a discomfort that relates to individual subjectivity in the face of social structures. In this case, after observing and teaching classes on gender issues to first and second-year high school classes, resident scholarship holders reported being unable to escape a sort of “group therapy”, where personal experiences dominated the debates to such an extent that there was no space for any theorizing. In a lesson on feminist terms and concepts, most students participated when the discussion touched on topics they could relate to their own experiences, but their engagement went no further than that.

The discomfort with the overvaluation of personal experiences was connected with the idea that Sociology in school should promote an appropriation of sociological language, helping to build democratic responses to current social conflicts (Lahire, 2014). As this seemed not to be happening the emergence of student experiences was perceived as scattered and lacking in meaning. As resident scholarship holders sought to carry out an engaged pedagogy (hooks, 2017), whose objectives encompassed transformation and the promotion of social justice, they felt unable to empower students to act as agents of change and challenge oppressive power structures.

In another situation, after an assessment on the concept of intersectionality (Collins, 2022) based on a film viewing, the students' answers confused opinion with the definition that had been discussed in class. This led to tension between the resident scholarship holders and the class, particularly with one student who could not accept that her answer, based solely on her subjective view of the topic, did not earn the highest grade. The student questioned why she had received a partial mark, and the resident scholarship holders explained that her answer, besides failing to explain the concept of intersectionality, was incomplete.

Although the resident scholarship holders were not averse to the experiences narrated by the school's students, they wanted to articulate these experiences with a reading traditionally understood as sociological. They aimed for it to be possible “(...)

to understand history and biography and the relations between them, within society” (Mills, 1982, p. 12). When faced with the constant return to the subjective experiences of the students’ narratives, without any structural or historical trace present in their speeches, they felt discouraged and unable to offer a Sociology that stimulated critical thinking (Ianni, 2011). Our task became to interpret these experiences more carefully, surpassing them without wasting them.

3 Sometimes, learning requires more attention and less intention

In the previous section, I discussed the importance of experience in Mills’ (1982) sociological craftsmanship and our quest to make constant reflexivity an ally of the practical experiences encountered by resident scholarship holders in Sociology within schools. In parallel, I highlighted the relationship between the artisanal sociology we aim to practice and the sociological imagination. This relationship is evident in how the problematic events arising from daily school life are not merely individual manifestations of different autonomous subjects, but operate dialectically in interdependence with social and historical structures.

Underlying these problematic events in schools and the exercise of craftsmanship and imagination, I see another fundamental dimension for the training of teachers in Sociology and its interface with public policies for the beginning of a teaching career. This dimension represents the limits and possibilities of a pedagogical perspective filled with too much intentionality, a perspective that burdens students with scripts or objectives to be fulfilled as if they were the products of established manuals on how to be a teacher. Criticism of this style of pedagogy resonates with John Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy and Tim Ingold’s view of anthropology as educational practice, both emphasizing the importance of experience in education.

Experience can be an indispensable starting point for learning (Dewey, 1979a, p. 7-9). Experience is not limited to isolated events but constitutes a continuous dynamic in which individuals interact with the environment and acquire knowledge through this interaction. Experience is seen as a constant interaction between the individual and their environment, involving observation, action, reflection, and

critical thinking. It becomes crucial to engage students in real-world situations where they can experiment and learn from actions and interactions.

Learning is not a passive process of absorbing information. It is an active process carried out by people who study and participate actively, exploring, experimenting, and reflecting on what they are doing. Meaningful learning happens when students engage in activities that are relevant to their lives. Thus, education needs to be rooted in daily life and students' concerns, preparing them to participate actively in society, developing collaborative skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. This perspective leads Dewey (1979b) to emphasize that theory and practice cannot be separated in education. Theory emerges from practice, and practice is informed by theory. For Dewey, meaningful learning occurs when students associate theory and practice in specific contexts.

Reflecting on the dilemmas brought from the school context and the importance of experience for educational practices and the knowledge construction, my goal became to promote among the resident scholarship holders a less "intentional" and more "attentional" teaching approach (Ingold, 2015, p. 27). While still guiding their planning and encouraging that their practices and observations was always guided by data and theoretical references, I began to accentuate the intrinsic learning from the dilemmas and difficulties faced by the resident group in the schools. Accepting the immanence of the world, its uncertainties and flows, we turned this "attentional" attitude into the raw material for our teaching-learning project (Schweig, 2019, p. 147). I sought to demonstrate how these problematic events and the necessary attention given to them have an educational character in themselves, as it is essential to deal (with care and responsibility) with their consequences, such as the increasing dispersion and disinterest in a school without electricity or the "excessive individualization" of also structural themes.

In the situations we analyzed, occurring in different schools, one of the main learnings was related to paying attention to the movements of teachers and administrative teams. Learning, after all, involves following what others do (Ingold, 2010, p. 21). Beginners feel, watch, and listen to the movements of those whose practices are more skilled, the specialists, and try to replicate these movements themselves. They aim to act like highly skilled practitioners, blending attention,

imitation, and improvisation. In this context, imitation or copying occurs under the guidance of experts, and improvisation emerges as beginners produce knowledge in their own way, discovering for themselves. Imitation/copying and improvisation are part of a situated and attentive involvement, essential for beginners to become skilled practitioners. The learning that occurs through this guided rediscovery is related to the notion of “showing”, making something present to someone, enabling them to grasp what has been shown directly, through their own senses.

Analyzing learning also means analyzing the production of knowledge. In this regard, the images of the maze and the labyrinth can be conceived as two senses of education (Ingold, 2015, p. 27). Traditional education is based on the model of the maze, a linear and hierarchical structure that takes students from point A to point B, following a predetermined path. In this model, knowledge is understood as something that already exists and must be transmitted to students who act passively. On the other hand, the labyrinth model offers a more engaging and immersive alternative for learning about the world. In the labyrinth, there is no predetermined path but rather a series of choices and possibilities. Knowledge is actively constructed by students, who are encouraged to experiment and discover the ways of life autonomously.

The resident scholarship holders had no power to make decisions in the problematic situations we examined, especially in the case of the theft of electrical wires. They also could not find ready-made answers at the university for the dilemmas they faced, as the undergraduate experience differed significantly from the experience of teaching in schools. The learning we valued was related to educating our attention to the actions taken by the school management and teachers, considering what we found valuable or not, and what we would do differently or not. Sociological concepts and theories were constantly supporting our actions, but the way they could come to life in the classroom could only emerge from the classroom itself. About the gender studies, students participated in small group discussions to analyze case studies or real-life scenarios in various social contexts. They were encouraged to apply the sociological theories discussed to critically assess these situations and identify underlying social structures and power dynamics. Their own experiences were used as possibilities for connecting themselves with other known experiences.

In the process of knowledge construction, attention is crucial. According to Ingold (2010), attention is not an isolated mental function but an activity that occurs in situated contexts. It has deep roots in direct interaction with the world around us. Unlike an internal mental process, attention is seen as an active response to the demands of the environment and the tasks we face. For this reason, the body and the senses are pivotal in educating attention. Our senses are the primary means through which we engage with the world, shaping how attention perceives, interprets, and interacts with the environment. As a result, efficient learning requires education of the senses, where we develop our ability to perceive the world with depth and engagement.

This perspective raises critiques of dominant cognitive sciences, which tend to define the mind as isolated entity processing information in an abstract manner. Context and concrete experience would take a back seat in cognition and learning. In contrast to this argument, effective education is not limited to information transmission or cognitive skills training. It should emphasize active engagement of students with the world around them. This entails exploring context, asking questions, experimenting, observing, and meaningfully interacting with the environment in which one lives. Educating attention is not confined to classrooms; it can occur in all aspects of everyday life. Its learning involves practice and action. Rather than passively absorbing information, learners need to actively engage in activities that challenge the use of senses, skills, and knowledge in an integrated manner.

Final Remarks

Teacher training in Sociology and teacher initiation scholarship programs have been emerging as important research topics among the Brazilian academic community in the field of Social Sciences teaching (Brunetta; Bodart; Cigales, 2020, p. 312). In the PRP in Sociology at UFRGS, we have built a connection between the university and basic education schools, aiming to strengthen the professionalization of future teachers, with the weekly presence of 15 undergraduate students in three public schools. By producing data through attentive reflexivity, we faced the challenges of the school by exercising sociological imagination and education of attention. This led us to seek to

understand the possibilities and limits of teaching “with” people and their practices conducted in everyday school life, rather than “about” them.

The two events that occurred in the schools – the theft of electrical cables that left one institution without power for a month and a half and the assessment on the concept of intersectionality – illustrate the challenges and possibilities of teacher training in Sociology. The first event highlights how external factors, such as lack of infrastructure, can disrupt the continuity of pedagogical practices and affect student engagement, demonstrating the limits of academic training in dealing with unpredictable situations in school life. The second event reveals the difficulties of mediating theoretical concepts with students' subjective perceptions, pointing to the need for teaching strategies that foster a deeper understanding of the content. These episodes suggest that Sociology teacher training must go beyond the transmission of theoretical knowledge, integrating practical experience and the ability to handle the dilemmas of the school environment, in order to strengthen both teacher presence and student learning.

Education in Western modernity has been characterized as a process of knowledge accumulation. It has been responsible for transmitting or instilling in learners what has been produced by humanity for centuries, with a focus on classrooms and curricular content. Schools and universities are exemplary institutions of this dominant conception, largely based on monoculturalist explanations of the world (Sodré, 2012, p. 15). Such institutions can also be classified as reproducing social and cultural inequalities, exerting symbolic violence on their audience, and reproducing a dominant cultural arbitrariness (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1992). Contrary to these perspectives, we opted to consistently address sociological content critically, aiming for an engaged approach to teaching Sociology (Machado; Caprara, 2024). This choice included leveraging students' experiences in our educational activities while educating our attention towards school phenomena.

It is evident that pedagogical intentionality is important and that this type of teaching is part of the educational process. Problematizing didactic mediation (Lopes, 1999, p. 201) and providing content for debates and activities were concerns throughout the PRP journey. What I proposed in this paper was not to neglect lesson planning, assessment development, or intervention projects in schools. On the contrary, faced with the central issues that emerged from the schools, we proposed to

immerse our teaching intentions in the learning that the problematic situations themselves insisted on making us consider. In other words, we sought to understand how our biographies and actions are interrelated with the social and historical context in which we live, stimulating that our critical reflexivity is intimately related to a posture of attention and deep interaction with the immanence of the environment in which our experiences occur.

Educating is much more than transmitting representations of the world. It is not limited to bringing information “inwards”. Knowledge pulsates when it leads people “outwards”, to inhabit the world they live in with attention. Knowledge pulsates when it helps to navigate the labyrinths of existence, experiencing paths that are less “intentional” and more “attentional” (Ingold, 2015). Educating does not have to be like filling a bucket; it can be like making a fire. You don’t know how the fire will be, where it will go, or how it will burn. There are always risks. However, educating can be flame and potency. It can be rediscovering life in flux. After all, looking at the world only through accumulated knowledge can make one see only the knowledge itself, and not the world.

In this perspective, learning is associated with educating attention. As Ingold (2020, p. 49) asserts, “(...) if education is about caring for the world in which we live, and its multiple human and non-human inhabitants, then it is not so much about understanding them, but restoring them to presence, in order to then attend to and respond to what they have to say”. Learning to be a sociology teacher, therefore, sometimes may result as much or more from an attentive stance towards practical events that emerge from the school territory, “getting the hang of it”, than from an elaborated intentionality in offices or pedagogical documents.

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Accepted in: august 2024