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The curriculum to teaching practice: student autonomy in teaching and learning processes

ARTICLE

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the relationships/intersections that exist today between the concept of curriculum and teaching practice and their impact on teaching and learning processes from a critical-reflexive perspective. It is based on a qualitative approach and is characterized as bibliographical study. Thus, it arrives at the understanding that the curriculum must be thought of in a flexible way to meet the needs and reality of the students, and that teaching practice has the mission of motivating the critical-reflective thinking of the student, so that they recognize themselves as a thinking subject, capable of reaffirming themselves as a social and cultural being, with autonomy, rights and duties; and, likewise, to subsidize the ethical and citizen construction of the student; and, in addition, to provide possibilities for the manifestation of these issues in the teaching and learning processes.
Keywords: Teaching Practice. Curriculum. Teaching and Learning. Student Autonomy.

Do currículo à prática docente: a autonomia discente nos processos de ensino e aprendizagem

Resumo
Este trabalho tem como objetivo refletir sobre as relações/intersecções que existem hoje entre o conceito de currículo e de prática docente e seus reflexos para os processos de ensino e aprendizagem em uma perspectiva crítica-reflexiva. Ampara-se em uma abordagem qualitativa e caracteriza-se como uma pesquisa bibliográfica. Assim, chega ao entendimento de que o currículo deve ser pensado de modo flexível para atender a necessidade e a realidade do alunado, e de que a prática docente tem a missão de motivar o pensamento crítico-reflexivo do discente, para que se reconheça como sujeito pensante, capaz de se reafirmar como ser social e cultural, com autonomia, direitos e deveres; e, de igual modo, subsidiar a construção ética e cidadã do aluno; e, para além disso, proporcionar

possibilidades de manifestação dessas questões nos processos de ensino e aprendizagem.
Palavras-chave: Prática Docente. Currículo. Ensino e Aprendizagem. Autonomia Discente.

1 Introduction

There are countless pleasures and challenges that we, as teachers, encounter throughout our teaching practice, both in basic education and in higher education (HE). Considering these developments, it becomes necessary to read, reflect, and write about these experiences in order to rethink and reframe what we are doing. This is because the teaching practice — reflective and ever-changing — contributes permanently to a process of continuing professional development, which can be increasingly improved through what we understand as an epistemology of teaching practice. In this sense, we refer to a teacher who cultivates reflective practice as part of their ongoing professional formation, echoing the ideas of Zeichner (1993), Schön (2002), and Tardiff (2002), all advocates of the reflective teacher.

Several other terms related to the epistemology of teaching practice can be found, as noted by Duarte Neto (2013, p. 49, emphasis in the original), who states that

> [...] various denominations emerge that, by characterizing these approaches, seem to establish connections with their theoretical-epistemological lineages. These include the ‘reflective teacher’, the ‘critical-reflective teacher’, the ‘teacher-researcher’, the ‘transformative intellectual teacher’, among others (Duarte Neto, 2013, p.49).

One of the ways to reach this teacher — or these teachers — is through writing, accounts, and narratives. Vasconcelos (2006, p. 78), when analyzing accounts from the formative period of several teachers, notes that “recollection is a dimension different from experience, yet the two blend during discourse, for the act of writing about the past carries multiple representations.” In this way, “the construction of memory joins the organization of language to produce the formation of meaning, conveyed onto the page through written words” (Vasconcelos, 2006, p. 78).

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Such a procedure is recommended even when reflecting upon the teaching practice we adopt. It is essential to continuously examine one's own pedagogical actions and, when necessary, to redefine them. For instance, it is important to determine whether our work is limited to the mere transmission of content (in disagreement with progressive conceptions of teaching and learning) or whether we are employing methodologies that are poorly aligned with the reality of contemporary classrooms, which are far from homogeneous environments. Thus, we can reorient our path toward an education that seeks to move beyond formalities, taking into account aspects inherent to a democratic, plural, political, and ethical society, and that insists on egalitarian and dynamic actions grounded in dialogue that fosters participation not only from teachers but also from students in the processes of teaching and learning (Freire, 1967; 1996; Goodson, 2013; Fialho; Nascimento; Sousa, 2016).

We also highlight that "this construction of meaning is not necessarily understood by the subject at the moment they are asked to speak about their life, either orally or in writing" (Vasconcelos, 2006, p. 78). This is due both to the reflective nature we discuss here and to the specificities of the reality examined by Vasconcelos (2006) in his research.

In light of these concerns arising from teaching practice, this article was developed as the final assignment for the course "Teaching and Learning in the Humanities and Social Sciences", taken in the 2021.2 term within the Graduate Program in Teaching (POSENSINO/UERN/UFERSA/IFRN). From this perspective, we chose to address the theme of curriculum and teaching practice, more specifically by offering some considerations on the construction of student autonomy based on the teacher's role.

Given the discussion above, this study aims to reflect on the relationships and intersections that currently exist between the concepts of curriculum and teaching practice, as well as their implications for teaching and learning processes from a critical-reflective perspective. The research is anchored in a qualitative approach, which "[…] requires that the world be examined with the idea that nothing is trivial, that everything has the potential to constitute a clue enabling us to establish a clearer understanding of our object of study" (Bogdan; Biklen, 1994, p. 49). From this perspective, the work presented here contributes

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to making the ongoing discussion understandable, reaffirming the rigor of the proposed theme while engaging with an issue that is closely related to the authors' own reality.

Furthermore, the bibliographical research employed authors such as Freire (1967; 1996), Goodson (2013), Sacristán (2000; 2013), Fialho, Nascimento, and Sousa (2016), Raad (2016), Saviani (2016), and Cabral *et al.* (2020), among others, as theoretical support for the reflections developed here. Since qualitative research is "[…] carried out using material that has already been produced, consisting mainly of books and scientific articles" (Gil, 2008, p. 50), our readings on the proposed theme allowed us to elaborate new reflections.

Therefore, in order to present what has been proposed along these outlined lines, we have structured the article as follows: first, we present the introduction; in the second section, we discuss the curriculum and pedagogical practices in the daily school context; in the third, we offer a perspective on teaching practice; and finally, we provide the concluding remarks.

2 Curriculum and pedagogical practices in the daily school context

We observe that curricular projects are designed to determine how subjects should be educated, what content they should encounter, and what kind of individual should be formed based on the proposed premises. Although we understand that the curriculum must overcome this ideal of imposition and, to some extent, of distancing from social reality, we perceive that, today, this operative dialectic still persists in educational settings.

We cannot deny the fundamental role of the curriculum in formative processes — both as an element for understanding and organizing educational practices and through its constant updates, which seek to meet formative needs and socio-educational interests. However, we must highlight the divergences inherent in this formative device, since, just as it is necessary for teachers to become aware "[…] that there is the possibility of a transformation process that not only modifies the representations of the subjects involved

but also provides a new meaning for their interpretation of the educational phenomenon […]" (Silva; Castro, 2022, p. 6), the curriculum must be aligned with this same perspective.

Thus, it is important to reflect that, regardless of the level of control established over education through a curriculum, "[…] the teacher's work, as in other professions in a capitalist society, is the result of the historical development of labor" (Silva; Castro, 2022, p. 6). A curriculum will never be able to encompass the full complexity or the possibilities formed — or continually being formed — by subjects in their lived experiences with the educational process. Consequently, despite pre-existing configurations of curriculum, it is the socio-educational actions of teachers and students that, in a decisive manner, reshape the organization of curricula.

With this in mind, we understand that, through the curriculum, teachers may think and act in ways that differ from what is officially "prescribed", positioning students as subjects of their own formation and enabling them to produce meanings according to their interests, needs, and educational perspectives, which are not always contemplated in official documents and practices. Moreover, we recognize that, in this context, continuing teacher education is also necessary, since teachers must remain updated and in contact with the changes that may arise within the educational system.

Our reflection is grounded in the social function of the curriculum, which we understand as being responsible for guiding teaching practice in accordance with curricular guidelines. In this sense, it is not possible to dissociate curriculum from teaching practice, as both are intrinsically connected in pedagogical terms. It is through teaching practice that the objectives and contents outlined in the curriculum are implemented and materialized in daily school life.

According to Saviani (2016), the curriculum is understood as the list of curricular components that make up a course or the list of topics that constitute a specific curricular component, which is usually referred to as the program. However, the curriculum is permeated by theories, and the main question concerns which knowledge needs to be taught. We agree with Sacristán (2013) in stating that the curriculum is a prior selection of the content that should or should not be taught, taking into account its pedagogical and

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didactic value. We also believe that the topics included must be aligned with the reality they are intended to guide, since, in summary, as Saviani (2016, p. 55) argues

> [...] the curriculum in action within a school is nothing other than the school itself in full operation, that is, mobilizing all its material and human resources toward the objective that gives meaning to its existence: the education of children and young people. We could say that, just as method seeks to answer the question of how to achieve a given objective, the curriculum seeks to answer the question of what must be done to achieve that objective. It concerns, therefore, the content of education and its distribution across the time and space assigned to it (Saviani, 2016, p.55).

Sacristán (2000, p. 26) states that “the curriculum is the intersection of different practices and, in turn, becomes the element that shapes everything we may call pedagogical practice within classrooms and schools.” In this sense, the curriculum is fundamental for teachers and informs their daily lesson planning. It is through the curriculum that teachers select and prepare the content to be used in the classroom.

The author further notes that:

> The value of any curriculum, of any proposal for change in educational practice, is verified in the reality in which it is implemented and in the ways it is concretized in real situations. The curriculum in action is the ultimate expression of its value, for it is in practice that any project, idea, or intention becomes reality in one form or another; it manifests itself, acquires meaning, and gains value, regardless of the initial declarations and purposes (Sacristán, 2000, p. 201).

As mentioned earlier, the curriculum is a guiding instrument, yet its true effectiveness is only observed in classroom practice. Accordingly, teachers rely on it to organize the content that will be taught to students, drawing on the guidelines it provides.

To better understand the practices adopted in the classroom, it is essential to consider how they are articulated within the school curriculum and to recognize that this document is formed through a process that unfolds from the inside out of the classroom and, likewise, from within and beyond the educational system.

Aguiar (2017) invites us to reflect on the fact that the school curriculum is the result of the ongoing interaction among various spheres of influence, stating that:

> The school curriculum is the result of the permanent interaction of several spheres of influence, such as social, political, economic, historical, sociological,

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> administrative, technological, among others, each acting in its own way with greater and/or lesser interference in the construction of the intended curriculum (Aguiar, 2017, p. 9).

Defending this school curriculum requires reflecting on pedagogical practices so that we may guide diverse content in a reflective manner, rather than relying on mechanized forms of teaching. In this regard, Franco (2015, p. 613) shows us that “lessons that are limited to reproducing arid discourses, manipulating pre-packaged texts, and lacking creative dialogue and ongoing reflection cease to be pedagogical practices; they lose their meaning and purpose for students.” It is therefore essential to improve teaching practices and seek methodologies that stimulate, motivate, and encourage learners not only to acquire knowledge but also to pursue new learning.

Therefore, curricula—especially when referring to compulsory education—must aim to contribute to students’ cultural, social, and formative development. In this way, the role of the school environment is fulfilled by “[…] educating and socializing students through activities planned in accordance with the school curriculum” (Sacristán, 2000, p. 18), thus ensuring a contextualized teaching and learning process.

Consequently, pedagogical practices promote effective learning that holds real meaning for human life. Society demands active and reflective individuals who are capable of thinking about themselves, who can fight to reshape their reality, design projects, and even recognize themselves as unfinished beings. Hence the need for more active schools, endowed with curricula that are more coherent with their social contexts, open to new experiences, grounded in educational systems that foster collaborative learning, and staffed by autonomous teachers who are creative and capable of constructing new knowledge while valuing both individual and peer learning.

We understand that when students come to school seeking to learn specific knowledge and master academic content, they must also be guided to perceive the importance of seeking, understanding, and reflecting upon the social and political issues that surround them. The school environment also constitutes a space that goes beyond the

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official curriculum, giving rise to what is known as the hidden curriculum, which fosters the socialization of the learner through:

> Rules and disciplinary procedures within the institution influence behavior and the formation of values. Break times, conversations in hallways, cultural and sports activities, leisure moments, celebrations, and participation in student organizations offer opportunities for socialization, identity formation, and learning. These spaces are important for social interaction, exchange of experiences, and enjoyment. In them, students learn about citizenship, coexist with conflict, and learn how to overcome it (Voigt, 2007, p. 47).

For this reason, we argue that the objectives established in the curriculum should be organized around elements that reflect the reality of the subjects involved. This does not mean that the curriculum should be designed arbitrarily or without structure, but rather that it must incorporate a certain degree of flexibility, allowing it to come as close as possible to the students' sociocultural context.

3 A perspective on teaching practice

Writing about teaching practice is not a simple task, given the complexity of the multiple realities involved. Even so, there is a substantial body of research that discusses this topic, addressing actions necessary to understand what occurs in schools, universities, and other spaces that make up this educational universe. Without these studies, which reveal diverse contexts, it would be impossible to approach and comprehend, even minimally, the breadth of such practices.

From this perspective of engaging in the discussion on teaching practice, it is important to highlight that schools have gradually adopted neoliberal discourses that sustain mechanized and technical processes, which ultimately serve to maintain and strengthen the capitalist system. As a consequence, "at every moment, the student is induced not to doubt or question, and the teacher is led to obey the instituted logic of social control" (Raad, 2016, p. 99). Such "choices" detach education from its liberating character and enable the beginning or continuation of "pruning methodologies." By way of example,

it is as if students were trees and the botanist (the teacher) pruned them in such a way that they could not grow, remaining stunted, since at every moment their “caretaker” determines how much they may—or may not—expand.

Such a situation brings us to the reflections of Demo (1991, pp. 88–89), who argues that “the school remains a formal corral where cattle are handled. The student, as a disciple, is cattle. In a strong analogy, a chamber pot that accepts everything without complaint and believes it is nothing more than that.” This provocation often leads some interpreters—just as occurs with certain readings of Freire (1996)—to misguided conclusions, such as assuming that such critiques advocate for the superiority of the student over the teacher. However, that is not the intention. As Freire (1996, p. 36) emphasizes, it is not a matter of “denying that my fundamental role is to contribute positively so that the learner increasingly becomes the architect of their own formation with the necessary help of the educator.” Likewise, Demo (1991, p. 87) underscores the importance of the teacher investing “in the idea of motivating the student to carry out their own elaboration, establishing this as a formative goal.”

This negation occurs within educational processes grounded in the political and ideological model that dominates schools. As a result, what should be taught and what should be learned is expected to follow the mechanized, commercialized, and accelerated movement of the labor market, distancing itself, in many respects, from the true aims of education. This is because “the mechanical memorization of the profile of an object is not true learning of the object or of the content” (Freire, 1996, p. 36).

Freire (1996, p. 8) also warns us that “in this context in which neoliberal ideology incorporates, among other elements, the category of autonomy, it is also necessary to pay attention to the force of its ideological discourse and to the inversions it can produce in thought and pedagogical practice by encouraging individualism and competitiveness.” This is a form of encouragement that disregards the importance of the other in the educational process, since learning is also built through sharing and relationships. Furthermore, such a logic leads to the perception that the individuals around us are merely competitors to be surpassed at any cost.

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In contrast to this perspective, Raad (2016, p. 100), drawing on Vygotskian thought, asserts "[…] that instruction, in order to be authentic, must incite development by creating the possibilities for new psychic formations." Thus, pedagogical relationships should not be marked by competitiveness or detached from the child's lived experience, but instead oriented toward fostering autonomy — a function that also falls to the school.

On this matter, Cabral *et al.* (2020, p. 77) reminds us that

> The construction of methodological strategies that involve innovative methodologies in face-to-face education still presents a challenge for both teachers and students. However, it must be acknowledged that the twenty-first century demands transformation as a guiding principle. Active methodologies, integrative actions, and interdisciplinary approaches are hallmarks of a new era. Nonetheless, we know that processes of change require a period of transition, a shift in mindset, adherence to new paradigms, cognitive flexibility, mastery of digital tools, and the courage to take risks. It is necessary to abandon the role of the sole holder of knowledge and become a mediator of knowledge, enabling a space in which students cease to be passive recipients of content and instead become active participants in the learning process (Cabral *et al.*, 2020, p. 77).

We are faced with a challenge that involves both the overcoming of ideological and hegemonic barriers and the constant need for updating teaching practice in view of the multiple identities, demands, and complexities of contemporary life. In light of the reflection offered by Cabral *et al.* (2020), we emphasize that teachers need time to transition away from this posture of being the "sole holder of knowledge", especially because they may still be accustomed to reproducing methodologies that shaped their own formation — practices oriented toward "covering content", preparing for internal and external assessments, and limiting the student to a merely receptive role and, subsequently, a reproductive one. This is perhaps the meaning expressed by Demo (1991, p. 83) when he states that the "[…] teacher is still merely a 'student'." However, the teacher's role must not remain anchored in these models. On the contrary, it should move closer to the figure of the "new master" proposed by Demo (1991), according to which "teaching is not the act of transferring knowledge but of creating the possibilities for its own production or construction" (Freire, 1996, p. 13).

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When the teacher begins this process — which is not simple — of reflecting on their practice, they start to look closely at the issues discussed here, reframing and reconfiguring their pedagogical actions. They learn to forge new paths, to adopt new methodologies, and to learn continuously from their own experience, which is why we refer to an "epistemology of teaching practice." This movement directly affects how their practice reaches students, the impact it generates, and the capacity to redefine objectives in order to promote students' active and autonomous participation.

Thus,

> Only then does literacy make sense. It is the consequence [sic] of a reflection that the human being begins to make about their own capacity to reflect. About their position in the world. About the world itself. About their work. About their power to transform the world. About the encounter of consciences. A reflection on literacy itself, which ceases to be something external to the human being and becomes something belonging to them. Something that emerges from within themselves, in relation to the world, as a creation (Freire, 1967, p. 149).

It is important to remember that the way this capacity for reflection develops in each individual is not standardized; however, despite these different temporalities, all individuals can recognize themselves as capable and contributive beings, able to join efforts and actions that support new individual and collective reflections.

Although this has already been addressed throughout the discussion, it is worth emphasizing that our aim here is not to offer "ready-made formulas" for teaching practice but to invite teachers to reflect, based on the reality of their classroom, on the teacher–student relationship, on teaching and learning processes, and on the possibilities of contextualized actions in the school's daily life. This reflection becomes necessary even in the face of the many challenges of professional practice, which affect both the psychological and physical dimensions of those who undertake the task of mediating the complexities of school life.

Thus, as explained, even in the face of the numerous demands of the profession, for such contextual and meaningful action to occur,

> The educator, in the midst of their teaching practice, must identify which themes are important for a given group of students so that, based on this understanding,

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> they may develop them in ways that generate contextual meaning, ensuring the learner's quality education (Fialho; Nascimento; Sousa, 2016, p. 77).

This quality education may include numerical indicators, but it must go beyond them by promoting collective constructions and recognizing the student as a citizen endowed with rights, responsibilities, opinions, and transformative potential. It is an education that encourages students to understand and problematize their own realities, developing critical and reflective capacities to think about democratic, social, cultural, and ideological relations — the "whys," "for what," and "for whom" of living in society.

In this regard, we may recall Freire (1996, p. 41), who argues that:

> One of the most important tasks of critical educational practice is to create the conditions in which learners, in their relationships with one another and with the teacher, may rehearse the profound experience of assuming themselves. Assuming themselves as social and historical beings — thinking, communicating, transforming, creating, realizing dreams […] The act of assuming ourselves does not imply the exclusion of others (Freire, 1996, p.41).

It is, therefore, a matter of making feasible what Freire (1996) and the other authors referenced here propose. It is both necessary and possible, but it requires that teaching practice seek, daily, to reinvent itself within and for educational and human relationships, reaffirming the student as someone who learns but also teaches, within a liberating education that believes in learners' capacities. Such practice seeks to meet — even if only provisionally, for it is a continuous process — the needs of individuals and society. This is because

> the teacher as transformative intellectual must be committed to the following: teaching as an emancipatory practice; creating schools as democratic public spheres; restoring a community of shared progressive values; and fostering a public discourse connected to the democratic imperatives of equality and social justice (Giroux, 1997, p. 28).

Thus, we understand that the desired profile for teachers today involves a sensitive disposition capable of "[…] diagnosing problems, reflecting on them and investigating them, constructing an appropriate theory (practical theories) that guides decision-making" (Alonso, 2007, p. 46). This refers to a professional who is open to new learning, who knows

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how to integrate Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into their teaching practices, who understands and embraces diversity, who promotes the construction of knowledge, and who maintains dialogue with colleagues, students, and the various educational agents involved. This profile has been strengthened by ongoing transformations, which highlight the need to rethink teaching practice, the curriculum, and teacher education in contemporary times.

4 Final considerations

Given the objective of this text — to reflect on the relationships and intersections that currently exist between the concepts of curriculum and teaching practice and their effects on teaching and learning processes from a critical-reflective perspective — we understand that it is necessary to break certain barriers. Although this is not a simple process, it is indispensable for reaffirming and strengthening these issues.

By reflecting on the curriculum within the school environment through bibliographical studies, it was possible to observe that, throughout history, the curriculum has changed and acquired new meanings. As the readings developed have shown, there are various understandings of what curriculum entails. When analyzing its historical trajectory, we note that, initially, the term referred more narrowly to the curricular component itself. Over the years, however, the concept expanded and came to incorporate new meanings.

Thus, we can understand curriculum as a set of experiences lived within the school environment, in dialogue with knowledge, that contribute to the formation of students' identities through social interaction. These are paths taken in order to understand and seek solutions for curriculum development, which, when put into action within the school, reveal themselves to be intrinsically connected to the social context and to its historical, political, and economic dimensions (Silva, 2009).

When considering the school's political-pedagogical proposal, the studies indicate that a curriculum and a school environment aligned with a liberating pedagogy must

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transmit knowledge while also being aware of the students' realities, seeking to bring these elements together. By adopting a critical and political stance regarding its curriculum, the school fulfills its social role.

In light of the theoretical discussions and the reflection on the information found in the reviewed literature, we understand that the function of the curriculum within the school is to guide the actions that take place in this context, offering indications about what is taught and what is done to ensure that the teaching and learning process unfolds successfully. Regarding the concept of curriculum, we understand that multiple definitions are possible and that it is not viable to assign it a single, definitive meaning, since it transforms according to the context and the historical moment in which it is situated.

With regard to this practice, it is the school's mission to foster students' critical-reflective thinking, enabling them to recognize themselves as thinking subjects capable of affirming themselves as social and cultural beings endowed with autonomy, rights, and responsibilities. In this way, the school supports students' ethical and civic formation and, moreover, creates conditions for these dimensions to manifest concretely. However, for this to be achieved, it is equally necessary to guarantee teachers' autonomy, for the more freely, lightly, and fluidly they are able to work, the more they can construct — or continue constructing — an education oriented toward freedom.

In view of the theoretical discussions and the reflections on the authors examined in this research, we find that the political-ideological principles of the neoliberal movement have influenced teaching and learning processes within schools, steering institutions toward attending exclusively to the needs of the labor market. For this reason, it is necessary for teaching practice to employ — or continue employing — methodologies that break with the production of passive human beings, articulating activities that problematize students' realities, acknowledging their desires and abilities, and encouraging connections between academic content and lived experiences.

It becomes essential to implement teaching and learning processes that seek the autonomy of learners, enabling them to recognize themselves as reflective and active subjects in school relations and in social matters. Moreover, students must perceive that

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this construction is a collective process, that we learn with others, and that individuals who share these spaces, knowledge, and practices are there to contribute and not to compete.

In addition, we understand that these are not simple tasks. The new demands of contemporary life remain challenging for teachers' practice, and time is needed for educators to reinvent themselves, especially due to the numerous physical, psychological, and economic factors that affect this professional-human role. For this reason, we emphasize that, beyond student autonomy, teacher autonomy must also be ensured.

Thus, we recognize the importance of this study, since the bibliographical research offered a broader view of the reality of the theme under discussion and provided insights that allow us to highlight issues related to teaching practice, curriculum, teaching and learning, and student autonomy, prompting reflection on the relationships between action and reflection and between theory and practice.

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