


**Tensions revealed in teachers' work in Basic Education guided  
by neoliberal education policies**


**Tensionamentos revelados no trabalho de professoras da Educação Básica  
orientado pelas políticas educacionais neoliberais**

**Tensiones reveladas en el trabajo de maestras de Educación Básica  
orientado por las políticas educativas neoliberales**

Luciana Pereira de Sousa\*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4498-9047>

Vanessa Sena Tomaz\*\*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4903-6405>

**Abstract:** This article analyses the tensions in the teachers' work activity on the regulation of policies for Basic Education in the state of Tocantins, Brazil, guided by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The research was developed through participant observation of classes and pedagogical planning meetings and interviews with four teachers in the 4th and 5th grade classes of the Elementary School. The analysis is based on the historical-cultural perspective and highlighted the tensions that occur in the activity when teachers face external demands from the Education Department, whose education policies are aligned with the neoliberal model of Education. The results reveal that such policies change teachers' day-to-day work lives and cause work overload as they need to restructure their pedagogical work. They also point out how teachers face the impositions of reproducing the neoliberal model through teaching alternatives that are not hierarchized by the system.

**Keywords:** Teachers' work activity. Basic Education. Education policies.

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa as tensões na atividade de trabalho de professoras dos anos iniciais pela regulação das políticas para Educação Básica do estado do Tocantins orientadas pela Organização para a

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\* PhD student in the Graduate Program in Education, Knowledge and Social Inclusion at the Faculty of Education of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (FAE/UFMG). Member of the Cultural-historical Activity Theory in Education Research Group (CHATER). Scholarship from the Coordination of Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). E-mail: <lucianaworm@gmail.com>.

\*\* PhD in Education from the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Graduate Program Knowledge and Social Inclusion in Education. Member of the Cultural-historical Activity Theory in Education Research Group (CHATER). E-mail: <vanessastomaz@gmail.com>.

Cooperação e Desenvolvimento Econômico (OCDE). A pesquisa foi realizada por meio de observação participante das aulas e das reuniões de planejamento e de entrevistas com quatro professoras nas turmas de 4º e 5º anos do Ensino Fundamental. As análises foram feitas sob a perspectiva histórico-cultural e evidenciou as tensões que ocorrem na atividade quando elas atendem às demandas externas da Secretaria da Educação, cujas políticas educacionais estão alinhadas ao modelo neoliberal de Educação. Os resultados revelam que tais políticas alteram o cotidiano das professoras e provocam sobrecarga de trabalho, na medida em que elas precisam reestruturar a organização pedagógica. Apontam, também, como as docentes enfrentam as imposições de reprodução do modelo neoliberal por meio de alternativas de ensino não hierarquizadas pelo sistema.

**Palavras-chave:** Atividade de trabalho de professoras. Educação Básica. Políticas educacionais.

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza las tensiones en la actividad laboral de maestras de los años iniciales por la regulación de las políticas de Educación Básica en el estado de Tocantins, Brasil, orientadas por la Organización para la Cooperación y Desarrollo Económico (OCDE). La investigación se llevó a cabo por medio de la observación participante de las clases y de las reuniones de planificación y de entrevistas con cuatro maestras de grupos de 4º y 5º grado de la Educación Básica. Los análisis se realizaron bajo la perspectiva histórico-cultural y mostraron las tensiones que ocurren en la actividad cuando éstas satisfacen las demandas externas de la Secretaría de Educación, cuyas políticas educativas están alineadas con el modelo neoliberal de Educación. Los resultados revelan que tales políticas alteran el cotidiano de las maestras y provocan sobrecarga de trabajo, en la medida en que ellas necesitan reestructurar la organización pedagógica. Apuntan, también, cómo ellas enfrentan las imposiciones de reproducción del modelo neoliberal, por medio de alternativas de enseñanza no jerarquizadas por el sistema.

**Palabras-clave:** Actividad laboral de maestras. Educación Básica. Políticas educativas.

## Introduction

In this study, we present a cutoff of an ongoing PhD research<sup>1</sup>, which analyzes how teachers from the early stages of Elementary School learn to reorganize their pedagogical work in face of the different demands of performance in a community school<sup>2</sup> in the state of Tocantins, Brazil. In that research, through participant observation, we realized that one of the aspects that adds tension to the teachers' work activity are the actions of the Education Department, guided by the policies defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Facing these tensions causes constant restructuring of planning and teaching practice itself, but it also generates resistance to the impositions of the system and highlights the learnings of these teachers.

At the school where the research occurred, which is affiliated with the State Education Network and its policies, the teachers' day-to-day work lives are filled with several events, with a significant portion not foreseen in the Pedagogical Master Plan, which goes through the classroom routine. Many of the demands are aligned with the guidelines of national and international education policies involving partnerships between the Tocantins Department of Education and public or private institutions (Department of Traffic/Tocantins; Institute of Nature/Tocantins; National Service of Industry/Tocantins; Ministry of Labor/DRT/Tocantins) to develop projects and programs<sup>3</sup> such as: *Programa Circuito Campeão* (Champion Circuit Program), authored by the

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<sup>1</sup> Doctoral dissertation in progress in the Graduate Program in Education, Knowledge and Social Inclusion, under the guidance of PhD Professor Vanessa Sena Tomaz, PhD in Education. Research approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Opinion no. 2.616.543, on April 24, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> They are instituted by groups of individuals or by one or more legal entities, including teachers' and students' cooperatives, which include community representatives in the sponsoring entity, in accordance with the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law - Law no. 9,394, of December 20, 1996, art. 20, item II.

<sup>3</sup> They will be detailed in the section "Teachers' work activity".

Ayrton Senna Institute; *Projeto Escravo Nunca Mais* (Slave Never Again Project), authored by the Ministry of Labor; *Olimpíadas Brasileiras de Matemática das escolas Públicas* (Brazilian Mathematics Olympics of Public Schools; assessment programs, such as the *Sistema de Avaliação da Educação Básica* (SAEB) – Basic Education Assessment System, and external performance assessments, such as the *Avaliação Nacional da Alfabetização* (ANA) - National Literacy Assessment, and *Provinha Brasil*<sup>4</sup>. Particularly, school performance assessments, provided for in the State Education Plan of Tocantins (Tocantins, 2015), seek to achieve the national goals of the *Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica* (IDEB)<sup>5</sup>, - Basic Education Development Index, established by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>6</sup>, which, in turn, are defined by the OECD international guidelines, an organ of which Brazil is one of the partners.

It is in this scenario of constant events, many of which were not initially planned by the teachers, that, in this paper, we analyze the tensions that occur in the teachers' work activity due to the regulation of the Basic Education policies of the state of Tocantins guided by OECD. To this end, the proposed discussion, in this study, is organized into five sections. In the first, we present the main guidelines of the OECD's education policies for Basic Education that have an impact on the policies of the state of Tocantins, as well as on the teachers' work activity. In the second, we situate work activity in the historical-cultural perspective of human activity and characterize the work demands that are imposed on teachers in the school routine. In the third section, we present the research context and the participating teachers. We also describe the empirical material and the theoretical-methodological analysis tools. In the fourth section, we characterize the unit of analysis "teachers' work activity system" and analyze the tensions that arise in the activity of teachers in face of the regulation of education policies. In the last section, we present the final considerations, highlighting the results and the theoretical and methodological contributions of this study.

### **Interface between OECD's education policies and education policies in Tocantins**

To understand the discussion that we will have in this paper about the tension in the teachers' work activity due to the implementation of education public policies in the state of Tocantins, it is necessary to situate the national context of education policies for Basic Education as part of the globalization process that aligns with neoliberal models. These models develop policies aimed at privatizing public services, valuing private property and the free market (Teodoro & Jezine, 2012; Robertson, 2012; Harvey, 2005). In the field of education, neoliberal policies are implemented particularly through OECD global education projects, which, in turn, guide the actions of education systems, as observed in the public education network of the state of Tocantins.

OECD is an extension of the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), which was created in 1947, through political and economic articulations in a context polarized by the Cold War. In this scenario, the European countries, members of the OEEC, bet on collaboration and mutuality between them for the economic recovery. In 1961, the United States of America joined this body, after the approval of the Marshall Plan, which slightly restored the

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<sup>4</sup> Translation note: *Provinha Brasil* is a test applied to students enrolled in the 2nd grade of public Elementary School. It checks the quality of the student literacy.

<sup>5</sup> In relation to the initial years, IDEB's result for the year 2017, released by the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research 'Anísio Teixeira' (INEP), the national average is 5.8 and the average for the state of Tocantins is 5.6 (INEP, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> PISA was created in the early 2000s and, in 2018, 79 countries participated, 37 of them OECD members and 42 partner countries/economies, including Brazil. The program evaluates the skills of 15-year-olds, with an interval of three years, highlighting the areas of literacy in Mathematics, Reading and Science.

economy of European countries, driven by barrier-free trade with the USA, which also guaranteed to that country a strong leadership within the organization.

Currently, OECD is composed of 36 member countries<sup>7</sup> and five strategic partner countries<sup>8</sup>, Brazil being one of them. This organization operates in several areas, such as economics, health, science, technology, employment, financial markets, commerce, agriculture and education. Through constant monitoring of information made available by members and partners, analyzes, discussions and orientations are made to countries, issuing statistical reports and research results. This information is transformed into indicators, which, in turn, serve to subsidize the implementation of “reforms” in different areas, including education, which is our field of study.

With regard to education policies, OECD, since 1990, has strengthened its actions by taking measures that go beyond the pedagogical field, reaching structures of global power. As the studies conducted by Afonso (2009, 2014), Barroso (2006) and Freitas, Sordi, Malavasi, & Freitas (2009) point out, the OECD recommends and propagates guidelines producing different forms of regulation and control of education policies in member and partner countries.

Since its foundation, this organization has analyzed and disseminated educational data, however, in the 1980s, they created the Center for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), with the function to elaborate indicators and carry out the systems assessment, so that they could generate guiding results of the reforms in order to improve educational quality within the scope of the Indicators of Education Systems (INES). Since 1991, the Education at a Glance report has been published annually, with an overview of the education scenario around the world. Among the information, the report provides data on the structure, finances and performance of education systems in OECD countries and in several partner economies, such as Brazil (INEP, 2019). In addition to presenting results from educational institutions, these reports measure the impact of learning; access, participation and progression in education and the financial resources invested specifically in the training of teachers, in the learning environment and in the organization of schools.

Based on these studies, OECD establishes a policy of international indicators that does not share only statistics, but also creates a system of classification and comparison between countries, outlining a universal educational standard. In general, OECD strengthens its own discourse on the development of programs and projects that aim to meet the demands of the knowledge society. Its *OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 project* (OECD, 2018, p. 2) is presented as an instrument to “equip learners with agency and a sense of purpose, and the competencies they need, to shape their own lives”. However, from the point of view of education policy, these indicators define the education desired by these organizations, expressing the interests of capital on the international stage and reinforcing “the concept of public-private management and the rise of business reforms” (Freitas, 2014, p. 387).

In Brazil, alignment with OECD policies is evidenced in the National Education Plan 2014-2024 – Law no. 13,005, of June 25, 2014, for example in Goal 7, which concerns PISA’S measurement

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<sup>7</sup> Germany, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, South Korea, Denmark, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, United States, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Netherlands, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Poland, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey.

<sup>8</sup> Brazil, South Africa, India, China and Indonesia.

strategies. Another alignment concerns the institution of the “All for Education Commitment”<sup>9</sup> in the Education Development Plan, in 2007, signed by the Ministry of Education and the business sector, signaling to the education networks and public schools the strengthening of public-private partnerships in education management.

The quality of education is assessed by INEP, which is the body responsible for processing, sending and reviewing national data in the publication - such as those of the School Census and Higher Education and others official data and statistics. In this sense, it is this body that prepares the program for the assessment and measurement of skills in the areas of Portuguese and Mathematics acquired by children in the third grade of Elementary School, through the National Literacy Assessment (known as ANA) and the National Assessment of School Performance, known as *Prova Brasil*<sup>10</sup>.

It is also important to note that, as part of the education policy reform agenda in Brazil, changes were made to the national curriculum guidelines, resulting in the document National Common Curricular Base (*Base Nacional Comum Curricular* - BNCC), which deals with “national reference for formulation of the curricula of the school systems and State Networks, the Federal District and the Municipalities and the pedagogical proposals of the school institutions” (BNCC, 2018, p. 8). With a clear alignment to the agenda of the reforms carried out by Brazil under the influence of OECD, the BNCC’s pedagogical foundations focus on skills development (BNCC, 2018). Produced without the participation of the scientific and academic community in Education, its implementation became a process of struggles and confrontations, in which several institutions<sup>11</sup>, nationally recognized, took a stand against the way the BNCC was systematized.

As we already mentioned, the state of Tocantins has been mobilizing to stand out on the national scene in search for better school performance indexes, as foreseen in its State Education Plan, in Goal 23, which deals with improving the quality of Basic Education, whose alignment with PISA is expressed in the Tocantins’s State Education Plan strategy 23.8.

23.8. improve the performance of basic education students in learning assessments, in the Programme for International Student Assessment - PISA, taken as an internationally recognized external reference tool, according to the following projections:

PISA	2015	2018	2021
Result average in mathematics, reading and sciences	438	455	473
Tocantins (2012) <sup>375</sup>	411	438	466

(Tocantins, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> A dialogue between the Ministry of Education (MEC) and the business sector. According to Barão (2009), the Master sponsors of the All for Education Movement are Gerdau (steel industry), Banco Real, DPaschoal, Fundação Bradesco, Fundação Itaú Social, Suzano (pulp and paper industry), Ayrton Senna Institute, Camargo Correia Institute and Odebrecht. There are also strategic partnerships whose dialogue is with the public sector through the National Education Council (*Conselho Nacional de Educação* - CNE), National Council of Education Departments (*Conselho Nacional de Secretários de Educação* - CONSED), Ministry of Education, Federal Public Ministry, National Union of Municipal Education Directors (*União Nacional dos Dirigentes Municipais de Educação* - UNDIME), United Nations Children’s Fund - an organ of the United Nations (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Ethos Institute and the Group of Institutes, Foundations and Companies (GIFE).

<sup>10</sup> Translation note: *Prova Brasil* is a census assessment of public schools in the municipal, state and federal networks, with the objective of evaluating the teaching quality.

<sup>11</sup> The institutions that opposed BNCC were the National Association of Research and Graduate Studies on Education (ANPEd), the National Association of Education Policy and Administration (ANPAE), the National Association for the Training of Education Professionals (ANFOPE) and the National Union of Teachers of Higher Education Institutions (ANDES).

In addition, the Tocantins State Department of Education, according to information on its website (Tocantins, 2019), also launched, in 2017, the “*Quem educa faz*” seal (Who educates builds), with the purpose of “[..] recognizing the merit of educators for their contribution to improving the quality of basic education” (Tocantins, 2019). The seal consists of the selection and awarding of pedagogical practices divided into categories. The first category is the achievement of the grade set by IDEB, and the award can be attributed to the Regional Education Directorates (*Diretorias Regionais de Educação - DRE*); public schools of the State of Tocantins; Municipal Education Departments/municipal schools; to teachers of Portuguese Language and/or Mathematics from the 5th to the 9th grade of Elementary School and the 3rd grade of High School. The second category consists of awards for the development of projects at different levels, from Early Childhood Education to High School, or for the pedagogical initiatives of school staff.

The alignment of the policies of the state of Tocantins with the national education policies that are guided by the OECD guidelines is also presented through partnerships between Tocantins State Department of Education and several private institutes and foundations. The partnership with the Ayrton Senna Institute (n.d.), whose mission is to “Produce knowledge and innovative educational experiences capable of inspiring efficient practices, training educators and proposing public policies with a focus on integral education”, is established through three programs: *Se Liga Tocantins* (Be aware Tocantins), *Acelera Brasil* (Speed up Brazil) and *Circuito Campeão* (Champion circuit).

The *Circuito Campeão* project is developed in schools in the early grades, among which was the field of this research. There is also a cooperation term between the Lemann Foundation and the state, to “support and train management teams to ensure the learning of their students” (Lima, 2017), and with the Itaú Social Foundation, responsible for the operationalization of the “Pedagogical tutoring program”, which aims to define strategies for solving educational problems faced by High School managers. In addition to partnerships with private institutes and foundations, the Tocantins State Department of Education partners with public entities and agencies, strengthening the social welfare policy. This is another aspect that reinforces how the state's education policies are aligned with the OECD objectives, that is, the state's adherence to the neoliberal logic for Basic Education.

Next, we will discuss how the work activity of the teachers is tense and regulated by the implementation of these policies for measuring the quality of education, giving relevance to obtaining the index of excellence measured by IDEB, as well as awards and classification for the development of projects resulting from public-private partnerships and reinforced in partnerships with public agencies.

### **The teachers' work activity: knowing the demands**

In this section, we characterize what we call “teachers' work activity”, as we understand that the activity developed by the participants in this research is not reduced to a set of actions for the fulfillment of the school curriculum, reflecting on the teaching-learning relationship. Furthermore, it concerns teaching work, as it is characterized by “activities and relationships present in educational institutions, extrapolating class rules” (Oliveira, 2010, p. 1). In view of the contemporary Basic Education scenario, we see that teachers' work is also affected by employment conditions - hiring, remuneration, career and stability (Oliveira & Assunção, 2010). In this article, the focus is on the teaching activity of teachers who are located on a “[..] border area between work and life” (Cunha, 2010, p. 3). This has direct or indirect implications in the work relationships that are woven in the school context, further tensioned by the demand for attention to the quality indicators of education in the current model.

In our view, the teachers' work can be characterized as "Activity" from the perspective of Leontiev (1981), that is, a group of people (subjects) engaged in the same purpose, with a specific direction for the object of the collective and social experience of the involved group. The activities consist of actions raised by motives (desires/needs) and carried out according to the conditions which determine the operations. The actions are subordinated to objectives that represent intermediate steps in their realization. The motives of the activity may have the function of forming meaning or stimulation of other actions.

Based on Marx's studies, Leontiev (1981) structured human activity into collective activities, showing how "the division of labor was important to differentiate individual and collective action" (Engeström, 2016, p. 14 ). It is in this sense that we return to the concept of work approached by Marx to understand dialectically the relationships that comprise work and teaching activity in the investigated context.

To Marx (1985, p. 212), work can be understood as the process in which an individual transforms nature and concomitantly transforms him/herself, which the author considers "human activity". Based on Marx's ideas about work, Leontiev (1981, p. 123) points out that "human work is a precursor to human activity", in which one is guided by his/her goals and, later on, intentionally plans his/her actions according to what he/she wants to achieve. To Leontiev (2009, p. 84), the activity is "a system that has structure, its own internal transitions and transformations in its development"; it is, therefore, a process that mediates the relations between the subject and the object.

In general, the teachers' work activity articulates various actions such as: content planning, preparation of tasks and assessments, registration in the school diary, application of evaluative activities, development of pedagogical projects, preparation for external evaluations of school performance, parents' meetings, care and attention to the conditions of vulnerability of children, among others that make up the role of teacher. During the field research, we identified work demands attributed to teachers that we believe to be closely related to the implementation of education policies in the public education system of Tocantins, which are in line with the OECD neo-liberal policies. In this perspective, as stated by Ribeiro and Araújo (2018, p. 412), we must consider that the activity of "teaching work affects and defines the social profile of the workforce that will be generated in social relations".

Such demands reflect the conservatism of these policies in an attempt to control the teachers' day-to-day work lives, who, as presented in the report *Trabalho docente na Educação Básica no Brasil: Fase II - Teachers' work in Basic Education in Brazil: Phase II (Grupo de Estudos sobre Gestão Educacional e Trabalho Docente [GESTRADO]*<sup>12</sup>, 2015, p. 119), suffers from a "degree of control". In the case of the teachers participating in this research, as we observed in their day-to-day work lives, the goals and objectives of the Education Department according to the education policies implemented regulate and define the selection of content, teaching methods, as well as the organization of time and pedagogical work.

The routine of classes is shaped by the demands already foreseen because they are part of the annual planning, either because it is a program adopted throughout the State Education Network, for example, the protocol of the *Programa Circuito Campeão - Champion Circuit Program*, or because they are projects that are part of its Pedagogical Master Plan, such as: *Sarau Cultural (Cultural Soiree)*, *Bazar Solidário (Solidarity Bazaar)*, *Todo Dia é Dia de Consciência Negra (Every Day is Black Awareness Day)*. However, there is a list of external and specific projects, not foreseen in

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<sup>12</sup> Study Group on Educational Management and Teaching Work

the planning or in the Pedagogical Master Plan, which arrive at the school, changing the routine and inflating the teachers' workload.

We had the opportunity to monitor the arrival and development of one of these projects during the field research: the *Projeto Escravo Nunca Mais* (Slave Never Again Project). This was a project that comprised an action by the Ministry of Labor, in partnership with the Tocantins State Department of Education, to develop, in the early grades of Elementary School, a combat strategy against child slave labor in the state. Other demands that significantly impede on the teachers' day-to-day work lives are the external evaluations of school performance (ANA, SAEB) and the programs coming from the Ministry of Education, such as the Brazilian Mathematics Olympics of the Public School, also covered by Tocantins State Department of Education in order to stand out on the national scene.

From the perspective of the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1987, 2008), it is relevant to analyze the tensions that arise in the activity of the teachers participating in this research, who seem to experience conflicts between what they idealize for the quality of the education of their students and the external demands for action that confront their own ideals.

Engeström (1987) uses Leontiev's term "activity", taking it as a collective phenomenon in a community in which individuals can always perform actions within a broader system of collective activities. In this perspective, a system of activities can be described as an event of long duration capable of generating actions and other events, and which develops over an extensive period of socio-historical time. It is a collective learning and has a complex mediational structure (Engeström, 2008). On the one hand, there is a close relationship between activity and activity system, because, according to the author, the day-to-day work activity can be seen as a system of at least two other interconnected activities. On the other hand, any activity system that has a shared object can be seen as an activity. Thus, given the complexity of the teachers' work activity, involving different contexts and their subjects, we consider our unit of analysis as a "system of activities", described by Engeström (1987, 2008).

It is in this maze of demands for action that the work of teachers consists of and that we expand our analysis lenses, as instructed by Engeström (1987, 2001), for work activity systems, connected to the social structure in which it is inserted and to a multiplicity of voices and intercultural contexts. We understand the teaching activity within a system of activities, designing a movement in which the activities of both levels (micro and macro) are interactively related. Thus, the micro analysis is focused on the actions of the subjects (teachers) in the classroom, teaching children in situations of social vulnerability; and the macro analysis is focused on a collective that includes different actors - teachers, students, school, the State Department of Education, institutes and partner programs, parents and other members of the local community.

We adopted the historical-cultural perspective of the activity (CHAT) because we consider that it is a wide lens to analyze the teachers' work activity system in its historicity and due to the prominence of tensions, in which contradiction manifests, as a set of driving forces questioning the current model, being able to promote changes in the activity system (Engeström, 1987). Engeström (2001) explains that activities are open systems made up of a multiplicity of voices, stories and cultures. When different perspectives come into contact (David, Tomaz, & Ferreira, 2014) structural tensions arise - conflicts and problems - within and between historically accumulated activities that increase and show the manifestation of contradiction. CHAT makes it possible to analyze the actions of teachers and, also, the teaching system, highlighting areas of interactions that go from the teaching-learning process in the classroom to the field of education policies.



## The research methodology and context

The field research was carried out in a community school, maintained through an agreement between the community, the municipality of Palmas (State of Tocantins, Brazil), which is responsible for the funding of Early Childhood Education, and the state of Tocantins, responsible for the initial grades of Elementary School. The “*Menino do Mato*”<sup>13</sup> school is located in a peripheral region of the city of Palmas, Tocantins, northern Brazil. The school is managed by a council composed of members of the community. Given the situation of socioeconomic vulnerability of the public it serves, the school’s Pedagogical Master Plan is in tune with the interests of the community, maintaining an intense dialogue and partnership in carrying out local projects. The acceptance of the diversity of demands, many of which are not foreseen in the annual planning, causes an overload of tasks and affects working relationships, however it is the agreements with the Public Education Networks that guarantee the financial resources for the functioning of the school.

On the other hand, the school has achieved indexes in external evaluations of school performance which place it in prominent positions in the state. In 2017, the school’s IDEB reached an average of 6.2, standing within the range of schools classified by INEP as having a good level - schools whose index is equal to or higher than 6 (INEP, 2017). This average is higher than the projection established based on the previous examination (6.1), which contributed to raising the state’s classification in the national scenario.

In addition, as accompanied during the observation, the school has also always been open to accept projects proposed by the state education department, which sees, in this partnership, a promising space for carrying out educational projects that can be successful. The good performance in external evaluations, according to the criteria of INEP, and the diversity of projects that it develops, associated with the intense participation in community life, make the school well seen both in the eyes of the partners and the community.

The research material consisted of field notes and audio records of two classrooms of 4th and 5th grades (morning and afternoon) and of pedagogical planning meetings, obtained through participant observation and individual interviews with teachers, also recorded on audio. We accompanied four teachers from the initial grades, Catarina and Jeanne (5th grade) and Elza and Cecilia (4th grade), from August to December 2018. All were trained in Pedagogy, with specialization in the area of Education and with an average experience of ten years in teaching. Teachers Catarina and Jeanne were public servants and had been working in the school for more than four years, while teachers Elza and Cecilia were teachers hired on a temporary basis and had been working in the school for two years.

During the observations, in addition to meeting the demands coming from the Education Department, we noticed that the teachers created alternatives to develop the children’s knowledge from scientific, social and cultural experiences, demonstrating their commitment to reducing the social vulnerability of the children and the community.

We initially worked on the research material transcribing the audios of classes, meetings and interviews; subsequently, we selected excerpts that allowed us to establish the relationships between the teachers’ work and the rules that configure the neo-liberal education policies of the

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<sup>13</sup> We follow the recommendations of the Ethics Committee, keeping identities confidential and using fictitious names for teachers, students and the school investigated.

OECD, forming the data set that is analyzed in this paper, in order to always look at the subjects-in-action within a broader contemporary social context than the classroom itself.

The theoretical lens of CHAT underpinned the structuring of the “teachers’ work activity system”, our unit of analysis. By highlighting the components of this system, as proposed by Engeström (1987), we identified the tensions that occur when teachers are required to act to ensure good rates in school performance assessments, in line with the documents of the state’s education policy guidelines, and to develop projects that are also aligned with the OECD’s educational goals, in contrast to the planning made by them, which pointed to other priorities.

The analysis of the activity system considers the multiplicity of contexts with which teachers need to interact in order to carry out their work, involving asymmetric power relations between participating members and regulatory bodies. In this sense, we place this activity within a constellation of activity systems, a circumstance that allows us to make different movements of zooming in and inwards and zooming out and outwards in the broader system (Engeström, 1987). On the one hand, by positioning the analysis lens upwards and outwards, it is possible to see the teachers’ activity system interconnected by a network of two or more activities; on the other hand, by moving the lens inwards and downwards, it is possible to analyze a particular activity and/or issues related to the teachers’ subjectivities, such as commitment, emotions and identity. Thus, as researchers, we have the possibility to “zoom in or out, understanding the different movements of the activity” (Tomaz & David, 2015, p. 459).

In these different contexts, the teachers were faced with the challenge of teaching guided by the search for human development – “mediated by culture and constituted by social relations between the subjects” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 33) - of children versus teaching to meet the criteria of excellence defined by the state’s education policies. Behind this challenge, we perceive the persistent manifestation of the primary contradiction of capitalism in education: for teachers, education is used to face social inequalities (use value); while for the education department, education aims to meet the criteria of excellence defined by educational indicators, reinforcing a model that deepens social inequalities (exchange value).

This is how capitalism’s primary contradiction of *use-value versus exchange-value* manifests itself in this activity, because “in capitalism, the contradiction acquires the general form of *commodity*”. Commodity is the object that has value (that is, *exchange value*) and not only, or mainly, *use value* (Ilienkov, 1982, as cited in Engeström, 2016, p. 112).

### **The teachers’ work activity: revealing the tensions**

As already announced, our unit of analysis is the activity of the teachers’ work, understanding that the *subjects* are the participating teachers, directing their actions towards teaching, *object* of the activity, mediated by cultural *artifacts*. Among these mediation artifacts, we highlight the projects of different origins and themes, guidelines and tests for external evaluations, control sheets of the *Circuito Campeão* program, evaluation tasks, among others. There are *rules* and standards that regulate and control actions. Some are imposed by the system - doing the annual planning according to the school’s Pedagogical Master Plan; aligning school planning with the State Education Plan, as well as the National Education Plan and the National Curriculum Base; achieving high rates in SAEB, taking national and international indicators as a reference; developing projects that are the result of agreements established between the Tocantins State Department of Education and public/private institutions.

Other rules are established among the teachers themselves in the search for children's human development: creating situations that guarantee children's learning in various intellectual aspects, not just in the areas prioritized by the Tocantins State Department of Education; to carry out the projects based on the reality of the community in order to enable children's access to cultural, leisure and other spaces. Behind these rules, there is a *community* that shares the education given to children, formed by members from different spheres, public and private, according to the activity to which they belong: other teachers, parents, community leaders, school managers and other servants, State Department of Education managers, Ministry of Education managers, OECD policy makers, entrepreneurs, etc. This broad spectrum of members in the community outlines a hierarchy of power, which highlights the *division of labor* in the activity, reflecting the functions, roles and authority between the different actors in the community and between them and the subjects.

This complex work of teachers involving different demands is structured by a network of activity systems connected to each other, or as a set of actions of a specific demand that, in turn, can also be analyzed as an activity system. In this system, we place our lens of analysis on the actions of teachers in the classroom, guided by the alignment of the policies of the state of Tocantins with the neoliberal policies for global Basic Education in the search for high levels of excellence in education.

The search for excellence through the system reverberates in the teachers' work activity, generating *tensions*, as they are compelled to act according to principles and values with which they do not always agree, in addition to generating an overload of work for them. Teacher Catarina, who we followed throughout this research, reveals a discomfort in relation to having to train children for specific exams. She verbalizes that other abilities of students in other areas of knowledge are not evaluated in this type of test and is opposed to this restricted view of evaluative exams.

In a way, we are manipulated for this; these indexes, they do not match the child's overall development. I look at this [having to prepare the students for the exam], I will train these kids to take *Prova Brasil* exam [irritated while talking about being charged to train the students], is that their life? [outraged]. What is this index in view of these kids' lives? Faced with a range of things that I should be working on and developing for them... For example, every year I think of taking them to visit the hydroelectric plant, but ask me if the content reached the part about generation of energy! (Professor Catarina. Interview, recorded on audio, December 13, 2018).

The discomfort shown by the teacher reveals the tension between the *subjects* (teacher) and the *community* in the face of the *rules* that, on the one hand, are put in place to guarantee performance goals of the Tocantins State Department of Education and, on the other, are seen by the teacher as ineffective or unable to contribute towards a change in the lives of her students, given the condition of social vulnerability. To define her actions towards children, it seems that the teacher is experiencing a conflict: on the one hand, she is concerned with teaching content that covers other areas of knowledge and that she considers important to understand the issues that arise for children in daily life, but, on the other hand, the Tocantins State Department of Education orientation is that teaching prioritizes the subjects that attend the school performance evaluation processes. This generates tension, identified between these two components of the activity system (subject and community), reflecting on the roles exercised in the *division of labor*: the teacher is the agent of the action, but her action is conditioned to the control established by the rules imposed by the institution (community) with which she established an employment contract. This institution, in turn, adopts rules that structure a neoliberal education policy that is not capable of breaking with the social inequalities that the school's students are subject to.

Students also question the attrition caused by the excessive volume of assessments, so that teachers are asked to explain to them the reason for so many assessments of Portuguese and Mathematics. For example, during a class, Teacher Elza justified to the students that, although the contents charged in the bimonthly assessments are close to the various external assessments or the *Circuito Campeão*, the grades achieved by them in these tests cannot be used in the bimonthly exams, even if related to the same disciplines.

**Teacher Elza:** You are noticing; this term test, a good part of it will be fractions, right?

**Pedro:** And we already saw this content at the beginning of the year.

**Teacher Elza:** Yes, Pedro, we have already seen it, but as it is external test content, we have to review it again. You just did the Math test at the *Circuito Campeão* with similar content to our test, but, as it was not allowed to count the score of this Portuguese and Mathematics test as a substitute for the term, we will do the test normally.

**Pedro:** This semester, we did a lot of tests! My God! Nobody has mercy.

**Teacher Elza:** Yeah, guys, everyone is tired. There were a lot of tests, it's exhausting, but we need to do it. (Math class transcription, 4th grade, Nov. 13, 2018).

This tension is evident in this system of activities between the subjects (teachers) and the community (led by the students and Tocantins State Department of Education, mediated by the artifacts (assessment tests) that also reverberate in the division of labor. If, on the one hand, the contents of external assessments are close to the contents of learning assessments; on the other hand, the grades achieved in the first cannot be used in the second. In this case, the tension also affects the division of labor between students and teachers, revealing that, although they share the school educational process, none of them have the authority to define the use of grades in the evaluation process. At that moment, the authority is of the managing institution. However, teachers resist only to reproducing the guidelines and tests in the classroom, creating other possibilities to ease the students' work overload. They prepare research works and projects that cover other areas of knowledge and adopt other evaluation criteria that are not reduced to tests of skills in Portuguese and Mathematics. This is one of the examples of how teachers deal with tensions, which, despite being subjected to this overload of work, do not give up their priorities and the values they really consider important, that is, the authority of teachers is not always subject to negotiations.

The dissatisfaction with the work demands received from the Tocantins State Department of Education is reiterated in the interviews with the teachers, when they talk about how they articulated the contents of the descriptors of the external assessments with the contents foreseen in the curriculum, in order to contemplate all areas of knowledge, another way to face the tensions in the activity adopted by them. In particular, 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers made it clear that it is necessary to make choices and that, in these choices, some content is prioritized.

So, there is some content that is affected. Even this year, it was a year that was affected. Every year is, in some way, because we need to prioritize the content that is covered in the assessments, usually Portuguese and Mathematics. (Teacher Catarina. Individual interview, December 13, 2018).

Sometimes, you can replace the content, because they are the same, but sometimes we also prioritize according to the external tests. This year the tests arrived late and they said that we had to do it, then we had to revise the specific contents; some had already been studied at the beginning of the year. Last year was more organized, [I had] the dates schedule, so we planned better. (Teacher Jeanne. Individual interview, Dec. 13, 2018).

Looking carefully at the effects of the global model of education policy on the programs and projects that are developed at the "*Menino do Mato*" school, we see that they have repercussions on the teachers' work activity, since the work, through programs and projects at school, has to accommodate all dimensions of education, in the perspective designed by the State Education Plan of Tocantins:

Goal 22. Strategy 22.10.

II - consolidation of an education, based on the parameters of quality and professional valorization, as a reference for the development of full citizenship, through educational actions and projects that contemplate all dimensions of the educational process and the socio-cultural, regional, environmental and ethnic-racial specificities, guaranteeing a comprehensive education, based on overcoming all forms of violence, discrimination and prejudice (...). (Tocantins, 2015).

In the development of the projects, as a result of public-private partnerships, as mentioned, the control of the teachers' work activity is reinforced by the award and classification policy of the schools of the network - the training of talents.

(...) the best works will be awarded with plaques and certificates; participation in educational, state and interstate cultural exchanges; participation in the award ceremony, in 2020, after IDEB is released; bonus for school professionals and publication of selected projects. (Tocantins, 2019, p. 1).

These criteria, foreseen in the education policies of the state, are in line with OECD programs, which, even though they are concerned with the human dimension and the well-being of the individual in different educational contexts, focus on individual effort.

To navigate through such uncertainty, students will need to develop curiosity, imagination, resilience and selfregulation; they will need to respect and appreciate the ideas, perspectives and values of others; and they will need to cope with failure and rejection, and to move forward in the face of adversity. Their motivation will be more than getting a good job and a high income; they will also need to care about the well-being of their friends and families, their communities and the planet. (OECD, 2018, p. 3).

In this context, teachers are required to develop “competences and skills capable of responding to the demands of the classroom as well as the daily activities of teaching work” (Ribeiro & Araújo, 2018, p. 415). As Freitas (2012a, 2012b) warns us, as partnerships between the public and the private sector progress in the field of education, the discourse of efficiency and effectiveness derived from business logic strengthens, guiding a model of education that meets the demands of the market.

The partnerships between the Tocantins State Department of Education and the institutions mentioned reveal another *tension* in the work activity of the teachers (subject) and teaching (object) that they will put into practice. As Engeström (1987) argues, the object of an activity can be expressed as concern, motivation, effort and meaning, which is predominantly related to the production of a result, which is not necessarily the real reason for the activity. However, as we cannot discard the individual needs and motives in an activity, considering the individual motives of the teachers, possibilities open up for a distinction between the object of the collective activity and the motives of the subjects, for example, between the motives of the teachers, partners and the Tocantins State Department of Education. The tension in the activity is evident when teachers are mobilized to teach seeking the human development of children in the midst of an extremely unequal society, making it necessary to even develop a project at school to combat child slave labor. On the other hand, these teachers prioritize the teaching of specific contents, meant to meet the demands of the labor market, which values meritocracy and highlights the talents, in alignment with the guidelines of the education policy documents translated by the state policies of Tocantins in the projects in partnership with private initiative and foundations.

At the “*Menino do Mato*” school, the *Projeto Escravo Nunca Mais* (Slave Never Again Project), initially imposed on teachers by the Tocantins State Department of Education, became an action that found meaning in the work that these teachers seem to believe to be really important in that

community. Aware that carrying out the project was not an option to be discussed, the teachers sought to plan actions that would meet their children's learning needs, rather than the needs of the Education department.

To carry out the *Escravo Nunca Mais* Project, I decided to research news about child labor here in Tocantins, to get a sense of the most common cases. I was horrified by the amount of news found on Google; just search for child labor from Tocantins news... I selected some material that I thought was important and that is close to the context here, in our school. (Teacher Jeanne. Excerpt from the project planning meeting, September 19, 2018).

Although we are obliged to do this project, the evidence of which, in the end, will be forwarded to another body [Ministry of Labor], it will be very meaningful for our students. (Teacher Elza. Excerpt from the project planning meeting, September 19, 2018).

When talking about these projects during the interview, the teachers reinforced their dissatisfaction with the way the projects arrive at the school and reported how the excess of projects affects their work. However, they agree with the importance for their students of the theme of that project to combat child labor.

I understand the importance of the project and the theme for our students, but I feel a disregard for our participation in decision making, considering that the projects will be developed by us. (Teacher Elza. Excerpt from the project planning meeting, September 12, 2018).

[The imposition of projects] affects, affects a lot, it is something we complain about and every year we talk about it. The Pedagogical Master Plan had more actions than what you saw, each year that goes by, it seems that they send more external projects, so to speak, to us; so we wiped the Pedagogical Master Plan down, because we were already predicting that this would happen and it is difficult, and what happens? It happened this very year: external tests, external projects, it ends up consuming our time and you have to choose. It is not that you are lazy about a certain project, it is not that, it is that we feel that it is thrown at us, there is no planning. (Teacher Catarina. Individual interview, December 13, 2018).

Thus, despite showing concerns about ethical, social and democratic values in the documents; in neoliberal practices, the workforce is sacrificed to the detriment of its economic interests, with "the promise of solving future problems" and highlighting what the system considers as "good practices", as it seems to us in carrying out educational projects developed by teachers.

It impacts a lot, I will not lie to you, no, because this project there [school reading project linked to the Tocantins State Department of Education literacy project], I will not say that it got in the way ... Is it good? Yes, it is. Is it a reading project? Yes, it is. But guys, we already work with reading the whole year, the whole year, so why make this culmination of such a size? And we just finished the [Project] *Escravo Nunca Mais*, and then it gets too heavy for us. (Teacher Jeanne. Individual interview, December 13, 2018).

Attributing to the schools of the State Education Network the realization of projects in different areas (traffic, environment, food, child slave labor, health, reading, etc.) imposes on teachers constant reorganization of the pedagogical work to meet the demands of the system, which seem more like the demands of a company, according to which they need to prepare children to be successful adults, capable of solving everyday problems and performing various tasks quickly and effectively. The question remains: which problems are related to children's daily lives? The pressure on teachers is in line with the discourse proposed by Education 2030: The Future of Education and Skills.

Children entering school in 2018 will need to abandon the notion that resources are limitless and are there to be exploited; they will need to value common prosperity, sustainability and well-being. They will need to be responsible and empowered, placing collaboration above division, and sustainability above short-term gain. (OECD, 2018, p. 3).

The tensions that occur in the activity between different components (subject vs. object; subject vs. community; object vs. rules) reverberate in the division of labor, as we perceive in the teachers' words. The teachers' discourse shows how they face the tensions in their work and how they resist the role of simple task performers: they develop projects based on ethical and social values, but understand that these practices can reproduce dominant structures, disguised under the promise of a better future for everyone. The perception of the system's power over the teachers' work confirms Taylor's (2009, p. 230) premise, when he says that, in an activity, "the community is not only part of the context, it intervenes in results of the activity", revealing the control to which the teachers' work is subjected, just as their actions are regulated, at the same time that they open gaps to act according to their own principles and values.

As we really have no option and the topic is important to our students, we will do our best. Let's do the following: each one will research this subject according to the age group of their class. (Teacher Jeanne. Excerpt from the project planning meeting, September 12, 2018).

Look, when I started with these projects, I was very overwhelmed, but I saw a lot that the children learned from them, like that *Escravo Nunca Mais* [Project]; the children participated so much, you know? They asked questions... it was good. The project that we developed, the one at the end of the year, of reading and writing too, it is hard, of course, it is very laborious, I will not lie to you and say "It is beautiful, it is wonderful!". No, it really burdens us, teacher. (Teacher Elza. Individual interview, December 13, 2018).

The tensions revealed in the teachers' work activity originate from subtle or sometimes not so much impositions that are kept behind official speeches/documents supported by the global development model, based on the market economy, ratifying, as stated by Savage (2017 as cited in Silva & Fernandes, 2019, p. 274), "the hegemony of organizations and education as a commodity".

Considering the historicity of the activity, tensions increase and we perceive the existence of a contradictory object - teaching - and a persistent manifestation of the contradiction in education that is constantly experienced: teaching seeking the human development of children, which includes breaking with exploitation practices that feed social inequality *versus* teaching to achieve the goals of effectiveness and excellence established by the indicators of the education policies of the state, risking deepening the inequality and social vulnerability to which students are subject to.

In this context, even knowing the work overload, the emotional stress, the impositions of the educational system, the often frustrated attempts to negotiate with the highest levels of school management and the education system, teachers face tension and resist, restructuring their work for the development of the projects attributed to them, moved by the object of the activity (teaching) and by the social responsibility that belongs to them in the children's learning and in the promotion of social transformations.

## Final considerations

By using theoretical tools from the cultural historical perspective (Leontiev, 1981, 2009; Engeström, 1987, 2001), it was possible to analyze the activity of teachers as part of a large work structure composed of other components, such as the educational system, public/private institutions, international organizations, among others. This theoretical lens made it possible for us to look at the actions of teachers at the micro level of the classroom and at the macro level of the system, through the education policies and literature of that field of study, as well as the interrelations that happen between the system and the classroom.

The analysis of the activity showed how the OECD discourse instructs the way teachers work for a type of education that meets market demands, reinforcing both internal and external thinking in the society that individual skills are drivers of the economic development and the reduction of social inequalities. From this perspective, it does not matter whether students belong to social groups on equal terms of dispute, as well as the socio-economic distinctions of the countries are not considered, or even issues of social class, race/ethnicity and gender - what matters is the individual capacity skills development.

Thus, in addition to elaborating and guiding international policies for Basic Education, OECD operates within the classrooms, strengthening the hierarchy of public management, defining the content that will be taught, shaping the time and the pedagogical space, supporting the speech of a better future for everyone. This means that "everyone" must do his/her best; teachers are overwhelmed with overwork, because whenever a new external demand is assigned to them, the pedagogical work needs to be reorganized. In return, the school also maintains good credit with the community, with partner organizations and with the Education Department, which celebrates good results and prominence on the national scene, which undoubtedly brings political capital to public managers.

In this context, the contemporary work relationships in which the school is inserted are permeated by the dimension of work *versus* results measured by international policy indicators according to which the subjects/groups (the teachers), no matter how much they strive and develop subversion strategies of the system, cannot share the same authority as other members of the community with greater hierarchical power. With that said, we understand that neoliberal education policies are loaded with intentionality that have direct impact on school management, on the evaluation of students and teachers, but also closely affect the teachers' work activity in the classroom.

However, when we focus on the activity of teachers in the classroom with children who live in a peripheral region of the city, it was possible to perceive how they face the tensions that occur through the implementation of neoliberal policies and restructure their activity, resisting the imposition of simple reproduction of practices that strengthen social inequalities and limit teachers' power of action.

Even in the face of an educational context in which it is increasingly difficult to oppose the discourse of these institutions - as their main argument is the search for effectiveness in the quality of education - teachers create alternatives to provide children with a variety of social experiences that are not hierarchical by the quality indicators of global education. They resist the premise that success or failure is the result of the effort of the subjects themselves (Contreras, 2012), whether they are teachers or the student him/herself who "does not try hard enough".



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