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Professional incorporation as a subjective experience: the case of novice teachers in Quebec^{1,2,3}

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Abstract

This paper proposes to study the professional incorporation of novice teachers from a socio-interactionist perspective of the teaching work, using a phenomenological-pragmatist vision, applied to the study of this stage of professional life. Based on the above, we try to answer the following questions: What is the perception of novice teachers regarding their working conditions? How do they live the professional experience during the first years of their career? Can we identify elements that facilitate or impede the professional incorporation during this early phase of professional life? To answer these questions, we have studied the case of novice teachers who practice in various schools in Quebec, Canada, through semi-directed interviews (n=46), analyzed by thematic categorization. The results reveal that the working conditions are very different and that they are linked to the contractual situations of the novice teachers, the material means for exercising the profession and the organization of the various establishments. Teachers experience these objective elements in different ways: positive experience (easy integration), negative experience (lack of accompaniment) and mixed experience (relativization of experience). Finally, we were able to identify transversal elements that facilitate or impede the professional incorporation (professional community, contractual conditions, students' involvement).

Keywords

Work conditions– Experience – Professional incorporation – Novice teachers – Teaching work.

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Introduction

For a long time, research on education has explicitly pointed out the relevance of the role of teachers in the quality of education systems (BOURDONCLE, 1993; MEIRIEU, 2001) and their incidence in students' learning (DARLING-HAMMOND, 1999; DIBAPILE, 2012; GAUTHIER *et al.*, 2013; GODDARD; HOY; WOOLFOLK HOY, 2000). Considering the above, some international organizations (Organization of Ibero-American States, OEI; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD) and education researchers have urged political decision-makers to debate and take action on various topics, such as initial and continuing education and, more recently, the professional insertion of novice teachers.

Teaching work has been described as an occupation of *uncertain routines* (BARRÈRE, 2002), an *impossible job* (CAGLAR, 1999), marked by the difficulties inherent to a complex work, and whose conditions of execution are mostly precarious (TARDIF; LESSARD, 1999, 2005). In this context, it is pertinent to ask how novice teachers perceive their incorporation in a profession of such nature and of such objective conditions, precisely in a moment of professional life where the tools necessary to assume all professional tasks are not fully stabilized.

Our study questions the experience of novice teachers regarding their working conditions and their experiences around the experience of professional incorporation. Considering this empirical basis, our main objective is to identify the elements that facilitate and impede professional incorporation.

To do so, we propose a classic presentation structure in four parts. In the first, we approach the problem through an introduction to the study of professional incorporation, to then look at it from its perspective of subjective experience. In the second part, we explain the socio-interactionist and phenomenological-pragmatist theoretical principles that guide our research. In the third section, we present the methodological notes and, finally, in the fourth part, the results of the comprehensive analyzes. Our work ends with a discussion-conclusion that resumes and questions the main results, in order to open new perspectives of work.

Object of study: professional incorporation as an experience

In order to establish the object of this study, in this section we present a general context of the study of professional incorporation, to then ascertain our perspective and the specificity of this work, namely the professional incorporation addressed as an experience.

Regarding the study of professional incorporation

Although we are not aiming for exhaustiveness, it can be said that there is a first group of long-established and more current works that indirectly address the professional incorporation, portraying, for example, the difficulties⁵ of novice teachers, through two perspectives: first, the sources and/or causes of their difficulties, with students and order management standing out, as well as the motivation and heterogeneity of the classroom (JOHNSON; UMSTATTD, 1932; MARCELO, 1986; OKIGBO; OKEKE, 2011; WEY, 1951) and, secondly, the consequences of everyday difficulties, such as dilemmas (RIA et al., 2001), suffering and/or being uncomfortable (BLANCHARD-LAVILLE; NADOT, 2000; LANTHEAUME; HÉLOU, 2008; MUKAMURERA; BALLEUX, 2013) and stress and/or burnout (FRIEDMAN, 1995; LLORENS; GARCÍA-RENERO; SALANOVA, 2005).

In the same way, the first steps in teaching have also been described as a period of *trial and error*, marked by the lack of confidence and by the *clash of reality* that opposes to the work imagined and fantasized before exercising the profession and experiencing the difficult everyday routine lived by teachers in their schools (VEENMAN, 1984; VONK, 1983).

In parallel, there is a second group of works that deals with professional incorporation directly, i.e., as a research object. These works –based on pioneering studies that have identified, for several decades, various stages of the teachers’ professional life (FULLER, 1969; HUBERMAN, 1989; KATZ, 1972; VAN MAANEN; SCHEIN, 1979)– have multiplied exponentially in the last 15 years, addressing issues as diverse as the attraction and retention of novice teachers (LONG et al., 2012; RONFELDT; MCQUEEN, 2017), the problems and successes of novice teachers (SOLIS ZAÑARTU et al., 2016) and the link between initial training and the first professional experiences (BASTIAN; MARKS, 2017), just to name a few.

According to Gingras and Mukamurera (2008), there are four different perspectives to understand professional incorporation:

⁵ The concept of difficulty is used in a generic way to refer to concepts as diverse as obstacle, suffering, burnout, problem, dilemma, etc., which appear in the scientific literature more or less explicitly according to each case.

- a) Incorporation as access to employment, i.e., as an entry into the labor market (CANALS, 1999) and as the professional path of teachers (MUKAMURERA, 1998), which focuses on the conditions of access to employment, its features (contractual status, duration) and the teachers' work trajectories;
- b) The incorporation to work or, in other words, the tasks and professional functions and the general conditions in which real work is practiced (MUKAMURERA, 2005). The scientific research focus, for example, on the study of the correspondence between the tools given during initial training and the actual work demands, the feelings linked to work experience, etc.;
- c) Incorporation as a process of occupational or professional socialization (TROTIER; LAFORCE; CLOUTIER, 1997); in this regard, research focuses on professional learning (strategies, management of tasks and functions), the support and professional development tools, and the construction of a professional identity, among other topics; and
- d) Incorporation as the entrance to a world and/or professional culture already determined (BENGLE, 1993), focused on interpersonal relationships, or the welcome and integration in the workplace, to give some examples.

On the other hand, professional insertion can be thought of as a *moment* (delimited between the first and the seventh year of professional practice⁶), which ends when teachers adapt to the context of practice, achieving a full and effective performance of the tasks inherent to the profession (WEVA, 1999), when they develop a certain level of confidence and ability (NAULT, 1999) and/or begin to worry about the improvement of their practice and of increasing their teaching strategies (LETVEN, 1992).

Considering these studies in the case of the novice teachers who participated in our research, we understand incorporation as the moment in the professional life during which teachers assume a new job, generally with little knowledge of the work reality, either after initial training, after returning to a job or after changing schools. During this process, newly arrived teachers have limited tools; in addition, they must complete the tasks demanded by the profession, but also build their professionalism, understood as the acquisition of knowledge and identities inherent to the teaching profession (LESSARD et

⁶ There are works that indicate that professional incorporation also impacts teachers who assume a new job, even if they have already had some degree of familiarization with the teaching profession (HULING-AUSTIN, 1990; LETVEN, 1992). In this regard, according to the trajectories of the professionals, the concept of incorporation includes three groups: those that make their debut, those that continue and those that return (GIBSON; HUNT, 1965).

al., 2004), within a complex process of professional sociabilization (ALTET, BOURDONCLE, 2000).

In essence, professional integration represents a dynamic process of development and appropriation of the professional culture, which is also marked by the subjective experience of the objective conditions of daily work, as we will explain later.

Professional incorporation as a subjective experience

Although it is true that some crucial elements for a successful professional incorporation can be established, within which the main one is the security of employment and the integration to the school environment and the profession (GINGRAS; MUKAMURERA, 2008), it is difficult to even think about a professional incorporation without considering the subjective experience. In this regard, professional incorporation is, above all, a unique experience whose interindividual components deserve to be studied empirically and completed in the light of other research works. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the concept of experience and, from there, to establish its subjective dimension.

According to Zeitler and Barbier (2012), three semantic zones of the word experience can be identified: 1) *experience*, i.e., what happens to the subjects during the practice of their activity, in terms of the transformations of the world in which they are inserted and of their own transformations as transforming agents of the world. This level of experience has a pre-reflective and antipredicative status; 2) *elaboration* or, in other words, what the subjects do with what happens to them, i.e., the constructions of meaning, their mental operations, and; 3) *communication*, what the subjects say about what happens to them, i.e., the narrations and formalizations about their activity.

We circumscribe our work to the third sense of the term, with a focus on the main actors of the experience of professional incorporation. Thus, and defending the idea that by knowing the experience through the words of those actors we can even access, at least partially, the *experience* (explanation of what happens to them) and the *elaboration* (professional learning), we are interested in communicating the experience of professional incorporation through the *experience formalized* orally by novice teachers.

Along with John Dewey, we think that it is a “[...] close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing forms what we call experience. Disconnected doing and disconnected suffering are neither of them experiences” (DEWEY, 2003, p.92). It is in

this context of the tension between the objective conditions and the subjective experience rooted in the first that we question how novice teachers *experience* the professional incorporation and how they describe their experiences, so we can then identify some elements that facilitate and impede it.

Theoretical principles: a double paradigm

In this section we describe our theoretical framework, nurtured on the one hand by socio-interactionism as a way of understanding teaching work and the phenomenological-pragmatist perspective as a way of accessing subjective experience.

Socio-interactionism as a prism to understand teaching work

The first principle that guides our study is socio-interactionism, strongly influenced by interactionist traditions in sociology (CHAPOULIE, 2001; COULON, 2002; GLASER; STRAUSS, 1967; REYNOLDS; HERMAN-KINNEY, 2003). From this perspective, the teaching work is conceived as an *interactive work* (TARDIF; LESSARD, 1999), where a person (the teacher) relates to other people (students, colleagues), in a specific organizational framework (the school and, more globally, the educational system). Interactive work involves strong linguistic and symbolic mediations. For teachers, their work requires high-level reflective skills and abilities to adequately manage the contingency of human interactions during their development.

Likewise, teaching takes place in a complex social organization: an educational establishment, linked to other institutions (local school committees and/or provincial, regional and national agencies). This true *school community* imposes a context of work marked by conditions that have a dual structure, being “[...] always both restrictive and enabling” (GIDDENS, 1987, p.226); in other words, every teacher (including the novice in professional incorporation) carries out his/her work in a structure that provides him/her with facilitating elements and obstacles.

Phenomenological-pragmatist orientation as a way to access experience

The second element that guides this research is the phenomenological-pragmatist orientation. In the first place, this implies a vision about the construction of scientific knowledge, which, for us, emerges by abduction (NUNEZ MOSCOSO, 2013). This allows us to adopt conceptual principles (notion of experience and interactive

conception of the teaching work) that are not explanatory but comprehensive, in view of the delimitation of the topic addressed. On this basis, we consider crucial the empirical data to, paraphrasing Husserl (1982), aspire to access the things themselves, namely, the teaching work as it is *experienced* by its actors.

Accessing the experience *first-hand*, i.e., from its *verbal formalization* by the subject of experience (DEPRAZ; VARELA; VERMERSCH, 2011), we are interested above all in the significance that the actor gives to his experience of professional incorporation. This significance is reconstructed from the invitation to the actor to explain the experience lived without *evaluating* or *criticizing* it, adopting a descriptive position that encourages him/her to remember what he/she felt at the given moment of each experience so, in a second instance, he/she can reconstruct the significance updated and contextualized in the present.

Methodological notes

In order to study the professional incorporation from its actors' perception, we contacted novice teachers who had recently begun to practice in the province of Quebec, Canada. They were asked to voluntarily participate in the study, ensuring all the deontological conditions of research in human and social sciences (protection of the data and identity of the participants, possible abandonment of the research in progress).

46 teachers participated (63% women, 37% men), trained mainly in the University of Montreal (50%) and, in a variable amount, in other universities of the province of Quebec (University of Sherbrooke, 10.9%; University of Quebec in Montreal, 10.9%; University of Laval, 6.5%; University of Quebec in Trois-Rivières, 6.5%; University of Quebec in Rimouski 4.3%), in another province (University of Laurentienne, Ontario, 2.2%) and abroad, 6.6% (University Mohamed 5, Morocco; University of Cahul, Moldova; University of Dakar, Senegal).

Regarding their levels of educational training, most of them were trained to work in the primary and preschool sector (30.4%) and in the physical education sector (30.4%). To a lesser extent, secondary school teachers from the fields of mathematics (4.3%), social universe (6.5%), foreign languages (2.2%), science and technology (6.5%) and French (6.5%) participated. Likewise, some teachers represented the sectors of school adaptation (6.5%) and other subjects (4.3%), and even a teacher without any study in pedagogy (2.2%) participated.

Most of the teachers had started their teaching experience less than 2 years ago (65.2%), while some had had approaches with partial teaching 6 to 10 years ago (28.3%)

and, in a more marginal percentage, more than 10 years ago (6.5%), having recently returned to educational system. As indicated in footnote n°3, both young professors who enter the profession for the first time and those who return after a break of several years, or who change class levels, can be considered as teachers in professional incorporation, which ensures the consistency of the sample.

The main data collection tool was the semi-directed interview⁷, whose content focused on objective aspects (description of conditions of access to employment: year of initiation, search strategy, contractual situation) and on subjective aspects (overall description of the experience of incorporation: positive, negative, experience with students, the contribution of the initial training and of the resources of the context).

Regarding the exploitation of the data, the work was conducted in two stages: first, the interviews' excerpts were categorized thematically⁸, in order to, later, restore the experience of the participants (ZEITLER; BARBIER, 2012) and its significance (DEPRAZ; VARELA; VERMERSCH, 2011), identifying – through a qualitative content analysis– a typology of experiences and the facilitating and impeding elements of professional incorporation.

Results

Conditions of practice: a description

The data show that the working conditions of the novice teachers are plural and linked to their contractual situations, the material means and the organization in the school establishments. Thus, work conditions range from an almost archetypal ideal (a school that offers a perennial job and that delivers a welcome support and a material aid at the service of the newcomer) to contexts marked by adversity (replacements of some days, weeks or months, during which the novice teacher must conduct his/her work without knowing the students, the colleagues and the administrative and support staff, and, above all, without enough time to understand and act the context to work satisfactorily).

Some excerpts from interviews reveal certain constitutive elements of the working conditions:

⁷ The empirical corpus shown in this work only represents a small part of the existing one in the framework of the projects mentioned in footnote n°1. Globally, it is a longitudinal 5-year work (2014 -2019), which implies a mixed methodology with numerous tools, the follow-up of the participants and the creation of a community of practices.

⁸ For this, we used the QDA Miner program, version 4.1.27.

- **Materials:** “There were no windows ... Oh, no! There were no windows, I'm going to say it a thousand times! I went to buy a luminotherapy lamp” (part. 37⁹).

- **Support:** “[...] when you start a job, you generally have a training with someone who explains how it works; instead, here you need to find it by yourself. Of course, we had a training at the other school but, at this one, we do not know how it works” (part. 4).

- **Contractual:** “If you have a 100% contract you are lucky. You do not get to choose your school, you do not choose the clientele and you are supposed to be happy with it” (part. 7).

- **Students' disposition:** “[...] I had no problems with the students” (part 8); “Sometimes (teachers) have particular problems with students who have more difficulties in classes, but when you make a replacement, you have no idea what to do with such students” (part. 4).

There are obviously objective conditions that gather a great diversity of elements. However, how do novice teachers *experience* these conditions during the process of professional insertion?

A description of the significance of the professional incorporation experience

There seems to be three dominant types of experiences of novice teachers regarding their first steps in the profession: positive significance (about 64% of the participants), marked fundamentally by an easy integration in the school community and by the strong involvement and motivation of the students; negative significance (about 27% of the participants), described mainly through the lack of support in front of the daily work and the precarious contractual conditions, and, finally, a mixed significance (around 9% of the participants), where professional difficulties are perceived from the angle of acquired experience and, in view of professional learning, relativized.

Although they only represent some of the elements evoked in the interviews, the following excerpts can be considered as paradigmatic of the three types of significance described:

⁹ Part it is the abbreviation of *participant*, followed by the number that was granted to preserve anonymity.

- **Positive significance:** "It is certain that my experience was good, because I was in the school where I studied and where I did my last practice, so it is clear that I knew the environment. Surely that helped me to build my confidence" (part. 15).

- **Negative significance:** "During my first contract, I felt that I had little help, that I had really difficult groups and that I did not have the support of the management... my colleagues... they guided me a little, but they saw that they were difficult groups and did not want to get involved" (part. 7).

- **Mixed significance:** "It is a disposition to develop, to have... to try to understand what is the work that I must do and how I should do it. In the case of teaching, it is a progression, a passion... but it is the same as when you learn something, you delve into it, you try to appropriate the work or the profession" (part. 11).

It is evident that, in terms of the significance of experience, the three modalities seem to be constructed from the very tension between the subjective dimension (taking distance, emotions, motivations) and what we might call an objective dimension (working conditions) of the experience of the novice teachers, as well as from the symbolic mediation of these significances.

A description of the facilitating and impeding elements during professional incorporation

In addition, it was possible to identify elements of transversal nature (evoked by most of the interviewees) and of a peripheral one (more punctual and only evoked by some interviewees) that facilitate and impede professional incorporation.

There are three elements of transversal nature evoked by the novice teachers; the first that stands out is the *professional community*, consisting of two substructures: the school establishment and the school committee. The establishment represents a facilitator of the incorporation when it is known and/or there is time to know it, when it is welcoming, when it offers a good working environment, when there are shared values and, therefore, it becomes a space for learning and for professional recognition. However, this can also be an obstacle to professional incorporation when there is not enough time to decipher its functioning, it is not welcoming and supportive or presents a chaotic operation. On the other hand, the school committee can be a facilitator of incorporation when it proposes relevant training regarding the performance of tasks linked to daily work and when it has a simplified and executive administrative functioning. However, they are perceived as an obstacle when their functioning becomes complex and bureaucratic and when they do not support new teachers.

The second element are the *contractual conditions* that become a facilitator when they offer a certain economic tranquility and allow to create lasting professional links and, therefore, a stronger involvement of the novice teachers. However, in other cases they represent an obstacle when the transience of the contracts does not allow for durable relationships and, given the precariousness, the professional identity and the tasks of the teaching work are strained between the representations, the projections and the harsh reality.

The third transversal element evoked is the *involvement of students*: on the one hand, it represents a facilitator of incorporation when the teacher is in front of children and adolescents motivated by school work; on the other hand, it is an obstacle when students are perceived by some teachers as difficult and little interested in school work, transforming teaching into a complex and even impossible task. In general, teachers who claim to confront groups of more complex students are not very critical of their own management of the class and of difficult situations involving some students.

Finally, the interviewees evoked peripheral facilitating elements (great attachment to the teaching profession and disposition to professional learning) and obstacles (lack of autonomy, precarious material conditions and a large amount of information that must be assimilated in a short time).

An overview of the experience of professional incorporation

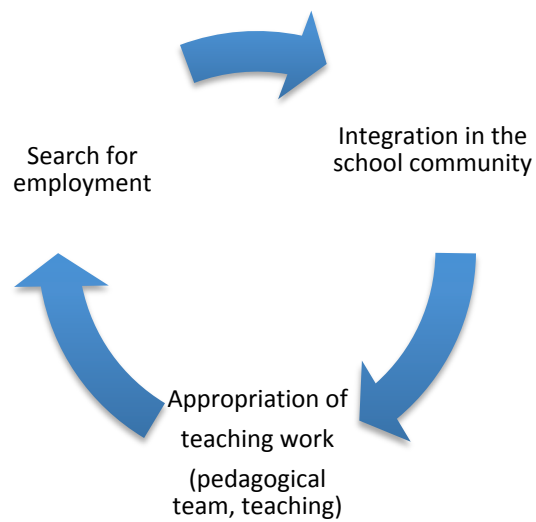
Despite the heterogeneity of the data and the diversity of the elements evoked by the novice teachers, it is possible to provide a general vision of the professional incorporation experience during its earliest stages. Without aspiring to construct a comprehensive model applicable to any process of professional integration, based on the empirical evidence that we have it is possible to retain two main aspects:

1) The existence of stages of professional incorporation

We can identify three large stages, of a cyclical nature, from which the significances of the novice teachers seem to be structured. The *search for a job* represents the first. Obviously, the significance of this phase will be mediated by the ease and/or difficulty to find the first contract and its characteristics (replacement of some days, indefinite contract). Depending on factors such as the functioning of the school committees, the contact networks of the novice teachers and their residency capacity, the regularity with which they change their employment, and the contingent needs of the schools, this stage will have a more or less significant degree of difficulty. The second phase is that of *integration into the school community*. The experience

during this phase seems to depend on the welcoming of the pedagogical and management team and the duration of the contract as a key element to be integrated (a replacement of a day or a week does not provide the same possibilities as a contract of several months or a year). Finally, the third phase is the *appropriation of teaching work*, during which the work environment, the material conditions and the characteristics of the students seem to be decisive.

Scheme 1. Phases of professional incorporation.



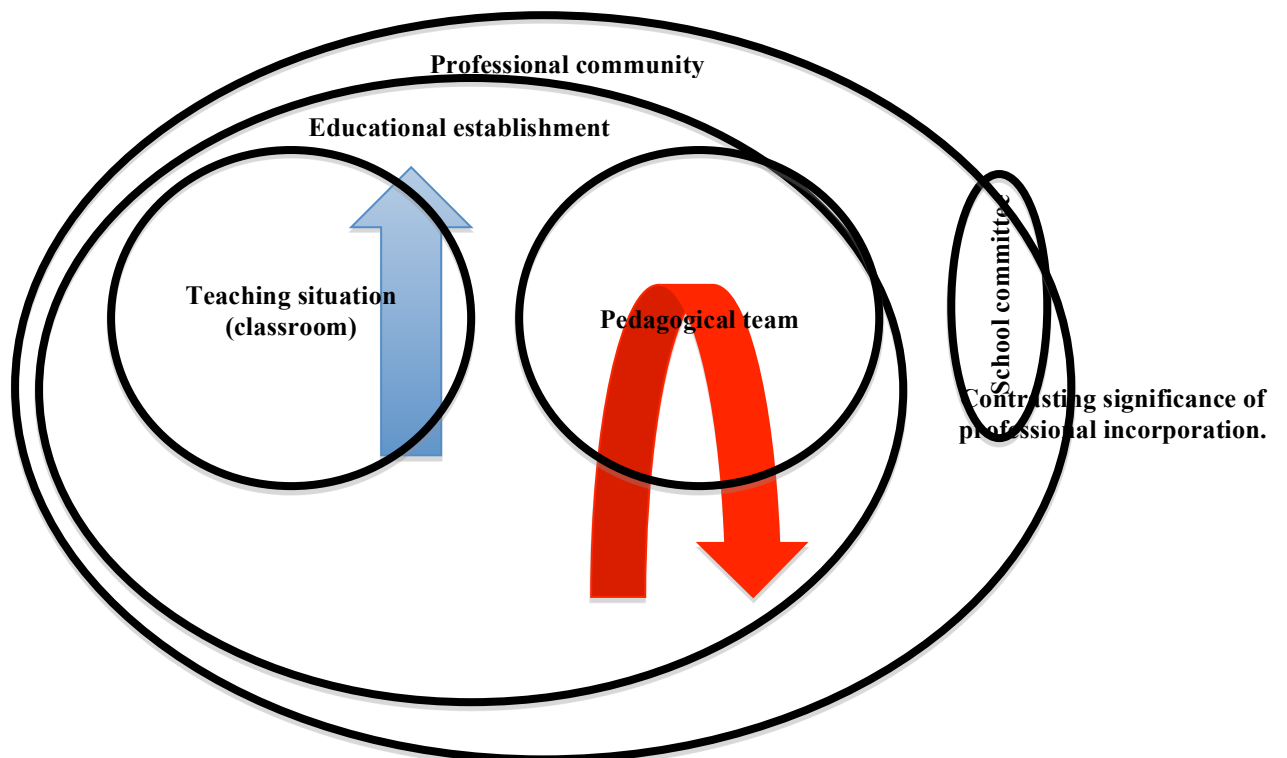
Source: Own elaboration.

Evidently, the aspiration of novice teachers is to break the cyclical nature of the stages of professional integration (scheme 1), fueled in large part by the precariousness of the first contracts proposed by educational establishments.

2) The identification of a global systemic structure of professional incorporation

The second aspect revealed by the empirical evidence is the apparent tension between the facilitating and impeding elements of professional incorporation. In other words, paradoxically, it is the same elements, but the degree of accessibility of the various elements for the novice teachers and their perception on the dispositions of the schools will mediate in the significance of the experience:

Scheme 2. Significance and constitutive elements of the professional incorporation.



Source: Own elaboration.

This tension (illustrated in the scheme with a blue arrow representing the facilitated professional incorporation and with a red arrow representing the impeded)

clearly shows what Giddens (1987) calls the structural duality of the organization and its *enabling and/or restrictive* power for the performance of the actors and shows, in our opinion, clear elements that reveal the double potential regarding the power of action of novice teachers.

Discussion and conclusions

Our study shows that the experience of novice teachers during professional incorporation is constructed by various elements, many of them objectively determined (type of contract, characteristics of the students) but always subjectively understood and lived by the actors. From the set of elements addressed throughout this paper, we highlight the following:

- *Working conditions of novice teachers*: there is an evident precarization. Numerous works have documented this element, but we cannot help but wonder to what extent the precarization during the professional insertion affects the abandonment of the profession, the professional identity and exposes those who begin to test their abilities and competences as professors to an *impossible* job.

- *The type of contract as a main axis of professional incorporation*: Gingras and Mukamurera (2008) state that labor security is as a key element of professional incorporation. Along with reaffirming this hypothesis, we consider that the potential for rupture of the cycle of professional incorporation (scheme 1) during the first years is low, contributing strongly to the level of involvement of teachers in their schools and to their consideration by the other actors (students, colleagues) as permanent members of the school community.

- *The consequences of structural duality as a shared responsibility*: as we have pointed out, the same structural elements can facilitate or impede professional incorporation. Faced with this reality, novice teachers can potentially develop a certain degree of *resilience* in the face of the most adverse realities, relativizing significances and placing them in a perspective of professional learning. However, it cannot be denied that work conditions co-structure experience and greatly condition the actors' power of action and, in Dewey's words (2003), connect action and experience to a specific context. In this sense, the responsibility to conduct the work can be considered as shared. In other words, how can a teacher do his/her job well if, precisely, there are structural obstacles during professional incorporation? Undoubtedly, this phenomenon can be considered as a modality of *impeded quality* (CLOT, 2010), where the educational medium tends to limit the power of action of novice teachers. This last

element represents a perspective to be developed in subsequent research, by developing the exploration of the structural limits imposed by the structure that reduce the quality of teaching work.

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