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How do teachers evaluate their training on the new Portuguese language curriculum in basic education?

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Abstract

This century has brought upon significant changes in Portuguese language curriculum in Portugal; one of those was the approval of a new syllabus for basic education (Reis, 2009). In order to help teachers understand the new curricular guidelines and change their teaching and assessment methodologies, the Bureau for Innovation and Curriculum Development organized a training program which involved teachers from the various schools, educational cycles, and regions of Portugal.

Some were from the Portuguese Autonomous Regions of Azores, and they became responsible for conducting the training process in the archipelago, under the supervision of the Regional Secretary of Education and a university professor.

That training process started in 2009 and it was organized in three phases. Phases one and two lasted from 2009 to 2011. They involved approximately eight dozens of Portuguese language teachers from eight islands of the archipelago and half a dozen of formers. The process included classroom training and distance learning, planning tasks, didactic material construction and experimentation, as well as peer work in schools. The third phase lasted from 2011 to 2013. It was mostly based on peer work in schools, under the supervision of the teachers who participated in the previous phases.

This process is now being researched in order to analyze teachers' representations on its organization, relevance, impact and constraints, as well as on the new curriculum guidelines (changes, adequacy and demands).

It uses a mixed methodology based on content analysis on documents produced by the teachers who participated in the training process (portfolios, reports, and didactic sequences) and their testimonies on online forums, as well as on a questionnaire, test results and a study case.

We here present some preliminary results on how teachers evaluate the training process based on content analysis on their individual reports.

Keywords: teacher training, curriculum changes, Portuguese language curriculum.

1. INTRODUCTION

This has been quite a busy century on what concerns language education in Portugal. Since 2001 the ministers of educational affairs have appointed several work groups whether to produce new syllabus for Portuguese language classes in secondary education (Coelho, 2001-2002) and basic education (Reis, 2009)[†]; or to establish the essential competences Portuguese language classes should promote in basic education (ME, 2001)[‡], and the

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[†] In Portugal, basic education is organized in three study cycles (1st cycle includes grades 1 to 4, 2nd cycle comprises grades 5 and 6, and 3rd cycle incorporates grades 7 to 9) and secondary education comprises grades 10 to 12.

[‡] The *National Curriculum for Basic Education – Essential skills* was subsequently repealed by Order 17169/2011, December 23.

learning goals it must achieve (ME, 2010), and the curricular goals it should pursue (MEC, 2012); or to change the linguistic terminology (Decree 1488/2004, December 24), and adjust it a few years later (DGIDC, 2008); or to establish the use of the Portuguese Language Spelling Agreement in schools (Resolution n. 8 of the Council of Ministers, January 25, 2011)[§].

Not only there have been many changes in the area as those have been significant and challenging for teachers, even more because they are not always consistent. For example, the curricular framework for Portuguese language in secondary education (Coelho, 2001-2002) clearly moved away from the literary and cultural trends that lasted for long in language teaching in Portugal and embraced a communicative approach, not without some discomfort and contestation in the media by some scholars and national individualities^{**}.

The curricular framework for Portuguese language in basic education shows however that there is no real consensus on the goals the area should pursue, for as it claims for an “(...) effective presence of literary texts in language teaching, valued as testimonies of an aesthetic legacy, not to be treated as mere typological cases similar to others with less cultural density (...)” (Reis, 2009, p. 5), it states that language classes should value “(...) essential aspects of language use: understanding discourse, verbal interaction, reading as a regular and critical activity, correct, multifunctional and typologically differentiated writing, and linguistic analysis with metacognitive purposes” (Reis, 2009, p. 14).

In fact, the area has been quite volatile depending on political ideas and decisions that sometimes reinforce the role of education in developing fundamental skills, as the Portuguese language framework for secondary education (Coelho, 2001-2002), or the National Curriculum for Basic Education (ME 2001) illustrate; others focuses primarily on the acquisition of knowledge and content, as the Curricular Goals for basic education indicate (ME, 2012).

In short, these have been challenging times for mother tongue language teachers in Portugal. Such turmoil demands constant updating and great commitment and resilience. Acknowledging that, the heads of education both on a national and a regional level have organized some training programs to help teachers cope with curricular changes and improve the literacy levels in the country.

It was so between 2007 and 2010, when the Ministry of Education carried out the National Program on Portuguese Teaching – PNEP (Order 546/07, January 11). Involving only teachers from the 1st cycle of education from the continental regions (Madeira and Azores were not included), PNEP was based, on the one hand, on the training, by college and university professors, of school teachers, who then became responsible for carrying out the formative process of their colleagues in their schools/groups of schools, through theme sessions on language teaching issues and tutorial sessions, in which they supervised their colleagues’ work in classes, through observation and analysis^{††}.

[§] The *Language Spelling Agreement* was ratified by Portugal, Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, São Tomé and East Timor, in 2008.

^{**} On this issue, you may read Dionísio & Castro (Orgs.), 2005, or Mira Leal (2012).

^{††} On PNEP you may read Raposo (2010).

Another example of such training programs was the 120 hour course promoted by the Bureau for Innovation and Curriculum Development between October 2009 and May 2010. This Training Program for Formers on the Portuguese Language Syllabus for Basic Education (Reis, 2009) involved 150 Portuguese language teachers from the 2nd and 3rd cycles of basic education from all over the country, including Madeira and Azores. The course was organized into four modules, combining distance learning, through an e-learning platform, with classroom training in Lisbon with the authors of the new Portuguese language syllabus for basic education (Reis, 2009) and experts in didactics and linguistics from Portuguese universities.

1.1. Teachers' training on the new Portuguese language syllabus for basic education in Azores

Six teachers from the Autonomous Region of Azores took part in that training program, and were then appointed by the Regional Secretary of Education to undertake the training of their peers in Azores in order to prepare them for the implementation of the new Portuguese language syllabus for basic education. Under the scientific supervision of a professor from the University of Azores, the Regional Commission for the Implementation of the Portuguese Language Syllabus for Basic Education designed a training program adjusted to regional specificities (territorial discontinuity and financial restraints) and curricular guidelines, namely the Regional Curriculum for Basic Education and the Regional Reading Plan.

The training program implemented in the Azores was organized in three phases. Phases one and two directly involved around 80 teachers from the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle of basic education from 8 of the 9 islands of the archipelago, and indirectly many of their school peers who participated in working sessions in schools. Phase three took place in schools and involved the teachers who were teaching the new syllabus under the supervision of those who had directly participated in phases one and two.

Phase one took place in school year 2009/2010. It included 50 hours of classroom training and 70 hours of distance learning, as well as working sessions in schools, organized and conducted by the teachers involved in the program in ways found fit to each context. This phase aimed mostly to help teachers understand the organization of the new Portuguese language syllabus for basic education, its key concepts and principles and methodological options, as well as to promote sharing and discussion between teachers on teaching principles and methodologies, both in classroom training, sessions in schools and on the e-learning platform.

For classroom training teachers were organized into three groups according to their geographic location. Even though there was a common action plan for all groups, it was then adjusted to each group's needs, concerns and difficulties. That led to different group dynamics, as well as to the organization of complementary initiatives, such as a workshop on the new linguistic terminology with experts from the University of Azores.

Classroom sessions involved the analysis of the new syllabus as well as didactic materials provided by the Bureau for Innovation and Curriculum Development, such as annual plans, didactic sequences and Guides to implement the syllabus on Reading (Silva, Bastos, Duarte & Veloso, 2009), Writing (Niza, Segura & Mota, 2010), Oralcy (Silva, Viegas, Duarte & Veloso, 2011) and Grammar use (Costa, Cabral, Santiago & Viegas, 2011).

Distance learning used an e-learning platform. It aimed at clarifying the training process; promote the analysis and discussion on the new syllabus' key concepts, principles and methodological options on theme forums; and encourage teachers from different educational cycles, schools and islands to share ideas, difficulties, teaching practices and projects.

Teachers' evaluation on phase one was based on: task accomplishment and interaction in classroom sessions; contributions to online forums; results on an online test on the new curricular framework (formonline); and an individual portfolio.

Phase two, which took place in school year 2010/2011, was affected by a set of constraints. The governmental decision to postpone the implementation of the new syllabus to the following school year, to make it simultaneous with the implementation of the Portuguese Language Spelling Agreement, invalidated the initial training plan, which included a clinical supervision process of the implementation of the new syllabus in schools.

The training program had to be redesigned and made fit to the new circumstances. Because of that the Regional Secretary of Education took too long to inform schools on how the training program would proceed; and schools did not organize teachers' schedules in order to facilitate their participation in the training process, which made it very difficult to create collaborative dynamics in schools in a systematic basis. It all depended on teachers' good will and time available. The process was then based mostly in distance learning (also for financial reasons given teachers' geographical dispersion).

This phase included teachers' participation in theme forums on the moodle platform and the construction and testing of teaching plans (didactic sequences) and materials, under the supervision and feedback of the Regional Commission for the Implementation of the Portuguese Language Syllabus. Teachers' evaluation in this phase was therefore based on the quality of their participation on the different online forums; their ability to plan, test and improve didactic sequences and materials according to the new syllabus; and their critical analysis on the training process (individual reports).

Phase three took place in 2011/2012 and 2012/2013. It was carried out in schools and was supervised locally by the teachers who had been involved in phase one and two, who worked with their peers on the implementation of the new syllabus, helping them plan their lessons and create didactic materials.

1.2. Research methodology

The training process described above is now under analysis in a research project aiming to analyze teachers' representations on the training program's organization, its relevance for their updating and curriculum understanding, its impact on their planning and teaching practices as well as on collaborative work in schools, and the constraints they experienced along the road. It also aims to understand teachers' perception of the changes the new syllabus introduces, their evaluation on the syllabus' adequacy to their teaching contexts, as well as the demands and implications it has both on a professional and (inter)personal level.

The study uses both a quantitative and a qualitative methodology, combining document analysis (teachers' portfolios, critical reports, didactic sequences, and participation on forums) with a questionnaire, test results and a study case.

The study takes place in two steps. The first step addresses phases one and two, and it involves those teachers who participated in classroom training and distance learning from 2009 to 2011 under the supervision of the Regional Commission for the Implementation of the Portuguese Language Syllabus for Basic Education. The second step addresses phase three, and it involves the teachers from the archipelago who were already working with the new syllabus in schools under the supervision of those who participated in phases one and two.

The results we here present relate to the first step of the research process, and regard both qualitative and quantitative content analysis on the teachers' individual reports written by the end of phase two. Our sample includes 55 reports (18 from 1st cycle teachers, 16 from 2nd cycle teachers and 21 from 3rd cycle teachers) in a total of 1035 content units (CU) distributed per educational cycles according to Fig 1.

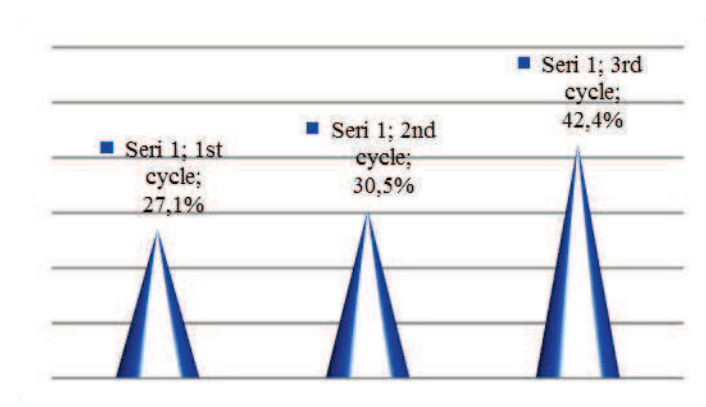


Fig. 1. Distribution of content units per educational cycle

Data refers to the dimension "Representations on the training process" and its analysis was based on the coding scheme presented in Table 1 (categories, subcategories and indicators were generated inductively from the data).

Table 1. Content analysis coding scheme

Categories	Subcategories	Indicators
Organization	Goals	Clarity Adequacy
	Duration	Adequacy
	Tasks	Adequacy
	Feedback	Clarity Efficacy
	Evaluation	Clarity Adequacy
Relevance	Knowledge update / application	Portuguese spelling agreement Linguistic terminology Teaching strategies Evaluation strategies
	Curriculum appropriation	Understanding curriculum principles and concepts Understanding curriculum organization Getting ready to implement the new syllabus Getting enthusiastic on the implementation of the new syllabus
	Changes in practices	Teaching strategies and materials Planning Evaluation strategies
	Impact	Sharing ideas/discussing/working together Sharing teaching strategies and materials Transfers to other contexts of activity in schools
Constraints	Political / organizacional	Reading Listening and speaking Writing Others
		The postponement of the new syllabus's implementation

Professional	Distance learning No conditions for collaborative work in schools Teachers' replacement between phase one and two Lack of time or energy Difficulty in planning didactic sequences Difficulty in using different teaching strategies Difficulty in using different evaluation strategies
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1.3. Results

An overall view of the results per category shows that when teachers address the training process they emphasize its impact (419 CU) over its relevance, its organization or the constraints they experimented (see Fig. 2). Although this highlight is common to teachers from all three cycles, 3rd cycle teachers are more critical on organizational issues and express more constraints.

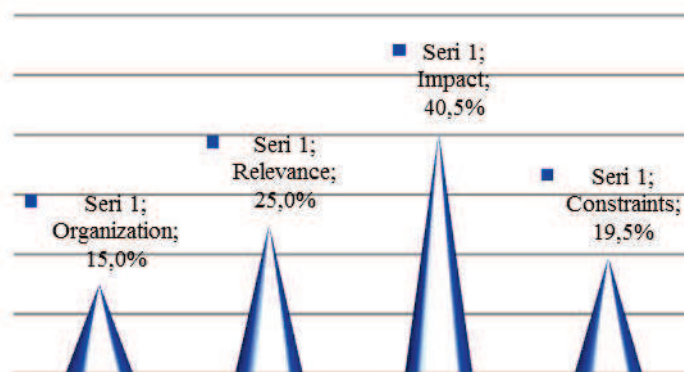


Fig. 2. Distribution of content units per categories

When teachers refer to the “Impact” of the training process, they mostly emphasise that it favoured collaborative work, mainly in what concerns *sharing ideas, discussing or working together* (124 CU). Teachers from all three cycles clearly point out this indicator over others, mostly due to the continuous interaction that theme forums allowed between teachers from different educational cycles, schools, and islands (see Fig. 3).

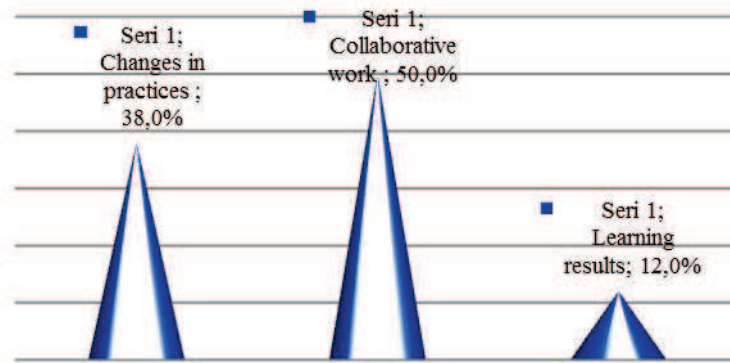


Fig. 3. Distribution of content units per subcategories in category "Impact"

Sharing experiences and materials is second in line (50 CU). It mostly happened during peer work in schools, which many teachers found difficult to promote (37CU) either because schools did not organize teachers' schedules in order to allow them to meet on a regular basis or because many of their peers did not show much interest or lacked time to do so.

Indicator *Transfers to other contexts of activity in schools*, though less referred to (34 CU), occurs in all cycles. For example, some teachers say they took a more active role in textbook selection, others say they suggested strategies to promote reading in school libraries, others even say they called the department coordinators' attention to certain pedagogical issues that should be discussed. This is in fact interesting information, for it shows that training on curricular issues may create opportunities for teachers to rethink their educational roles and activities beyond the classroom.

Subcategory *Changes in practices* (160 CU) follows collaborative work. In this case, teachers particularly say the training process helped them *change strategies and materials* they used in their classes (113 CU). We cannot prove so for there was no observation involved in this study. Besides, we must not forget these reports were meant to be evaluated by the commission that supervised the training process, and even though the evaluation criteria did not include reporting changes in teaching practices there may be a contamination effect.

Although we cannot say that these numbers correspond to effective change and we all know educational changes take long time are not without some discomfort and great effort, we must take this data into account as we analyse teachers' didactic sequences (a task that will take place later on according to the chronogram of the study). It is also important to relate this data to the fact that teachers sometimes give notice of the impact those changes had in their students' learning results in reading (18 CU), listening and/or speaking skills (10 CU) or writing (3CU). Some teachers are less specific or just say their students became more enthusiastic and interested in language learning (20 CU).

The "Relevance" of the training program is also quite highlighted in reports (164 CU). Teachers mostly refer that it allowed them to better *understand curriculum principles and concepts* (78CU), and helped them *get ready to implement the new syllabus* (52 CU) (see Fig. 4). Nevertheless, they don't seem to *feel very enthusiastic* to do so yet (15 CU), maybe because many still find it difficult to plan didactic sequences (22 CU), change teaching strategies (13 CU) or evaluating strategies (4 CU). It is mostly 3rd cycle teachers that say so (16 CU), which is

quite unexpected for they also teach in secondary education, so they must be working with a similar curricular framework for quite some time (remember Portuguese Language Syllabus for Secondary Education was approved in 2001). No doubt curricular changes walk faster than pedagogical ones.

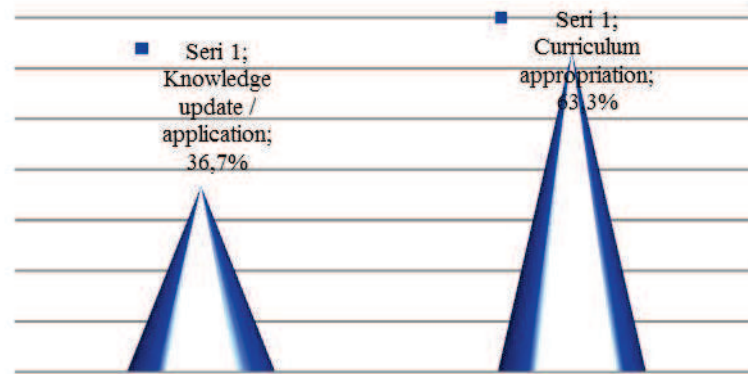


Fig. 4. Distribution of content units per subcategories in category "Relevance"

"Constraints" is the second last category teachers refer to. The constraints they point out are either related to political and organizational factors, or to professional issues (see Fig. 5). The constraint teachers refer the most is their *lack of time or energy* to further invest on their tasks (60 CU), namely interaction on online forums (21 CU) and sequence planning (12 CU). In this subject matter 1st cycle teachers are the ones who complain the most (24 CU), compared to 3rd cycle (19 CU) and 2nd cycle (17 CU) – remember 1st cycle reports are the ones with less CU in total.

They also find a great constraint in *distance learning* (45 CU). They don't think it is as effective as classroom training, because it "makes the communication between participants more difficult and does not allow sharing ideas during tasks" (I3)^{‡‡}. Teachers blame this constraint on the political decision to *postpone the implementation of the new syllabus* (14 CU) as they find this decision made it more difficult to *promote collaborative work in schools* (37 CU), for, as we previously explained, schools did not organize teachers' schedules in order to make that happen and teachers say their peers found that once the syllabus had been postponed there was no rush to get familiar with it.

^{‡‡} Teachers' reports were coded to preserve their identity. The letter refers to the author and the number to his/her cycle of education.

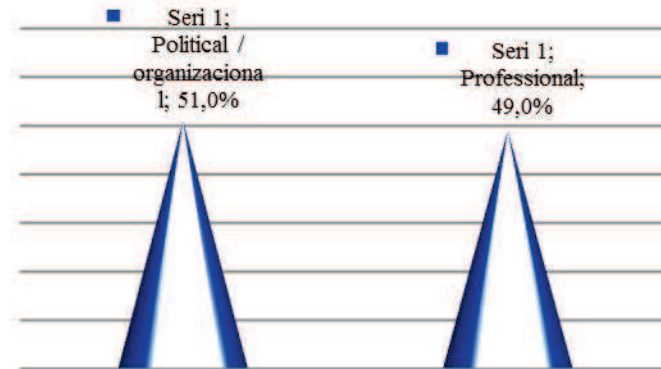
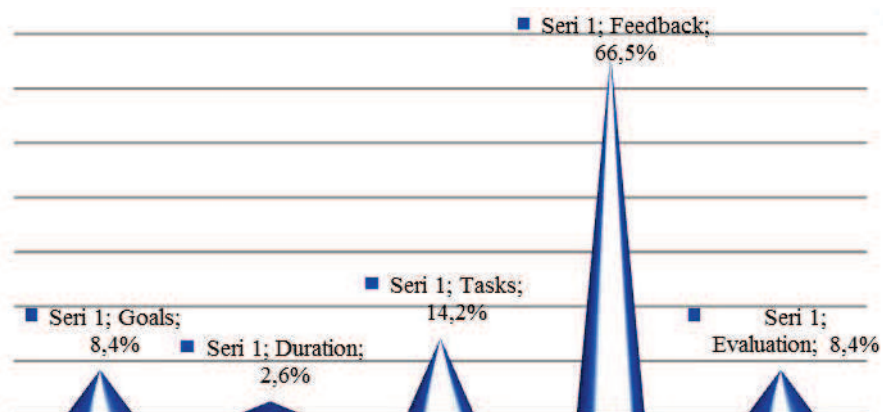


Fig. 5. Distribution of content units per subcategories in category "Constraints"

Other constraints they refer to are mostly professional and derive from the didactic changes the new syllabus demands: *planning* (22UR), *teaching methodologies* (13 CU), *evaluation strategies* (4 CU). It is curious that evaluation does not get much attention from these teachers. It appeared quite a problematic area in a study conducted on the implementation of the Portuguese Language syllabus for secondary education in Azores (Mira Leal, 2008), mainly because it valued oral skills and formative practices. Didactic sequences' analysis may prove relevant to better understand these results.

"Organization" is the category teachers refer to the least (155 CU) in a direct manner. In this category teachers focus mainly in feedback (see Fig. 6), maybe because it was the most important strategy included in phase two to help teachers put the syllabus' principles and methodological instructions in action.



Teachers who refer to feedback mostly say it was efficient (55 CU) and clear (13 CU), nevertheless some say that “the fact that it was only in writing, without dialogue between the formers and the teachers ma[de] it a unilateral process, more evaluative than formative” (I3). That is also the argument used by those who find feedback not clear (6 CU) or effective (27 CU), mostly 3rd cycle teachers (24 CU).

This feedback referred to the tasks teachers had to perform – sequence planning and material construction, as well as participation in online forums. Even though not many teachers refer directly to the adequacy of such tasks (16 CU say they were adequate to the training goals, 6 CU say they were not adequate to the constraints they faced during the process), results make it clear that teachers found their training process in general, and those tasks in particular, relevant and with great impact in their professional lives in and beyond the classroom (671 CU).

Very few teachers refer to duration (4 CU) and evaluation (13 CU). In the first case they mostly find it adequate (3CU). That is not so in the second one (5 CU say it was clear and adequate, 8 CU say the opposite), mostly because they didn’t agree with criteria or final grade. Almost all teachers refer to the training goals but only a few discuss their clarity or adequacy (13 CU). Nevertheless, those who do so say the training goals were clear (6 CU) and adequate (6 CU).

CONCLUSION

Curricular changes are usually demanding and challenging for teachers. Even more if those are various, recurring and constitute significant change to teachers knowledge or pedagogical action.

Educational authorities must take that into consideration and help teachers cope and adapt. Training is usually the best way to do so. But training can go many ways. The training program we here analyzed had different approaches to the training process, including classroom training, distance learning and training in context. We here focused mainly on the distance learning phase to which our data referred to specifically, even though it may somehow be impregnated with teachers’ ideas on phase one, that combined classroom training with distance learning.

Results indicate that teachers do not find distance learning as effective as classroom training, which many say “would have had a more positive and efficient impact on the adjustment that must take place” (E3). Nevertheless, they see significant impact and relevance in the training process mostly in promoting collaborative work in schools, understanding the new curricular framework for Portuguese language classes in basic education, and changing pedagogical practices, despite the various constraints they refer to.

Even though the professional constraints they signal are expected and quite natural in a process that aims to help teachers deal and adjust to change, the political and organizational ones should have been avoided or minimized, for they seem to have created some anxiety, confusion and disbelief among teachers, feelings that do not help educational change.

We expect this study to bring more interesting information on the training process it scrutinizes as we go along the various research tasks and stages.

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