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Alfaletrar Project: an innovative education experience of continuing education for professional teacher development in Lagoa Santa - MG

Projeto Alfaletrar: uma experiência inovadora de formação continuada para o desenvolvimento profissional docente em Lagoa Santa - MG

Proyecto Alfaletrar: una experiencia innovadora de formación continua para el desarrollo profesional docente em Lagoa Santa - MG

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Abstract

This study analyzes the education for professional teacher development and the innovative pedagogical actions that make up the Alfaletar Project, developed in the Municipal Education Network of Lagoa Santa-MG. It seeks to apprehend the epistemological concepts that guide continuing education for professional development of teachers in this Education Network and to understand the curricular propositions that guide the teaching of reading and writing in this municipality. This is an experience considered a reference for education networks across the country. Methodology favored bibliographic research (papers published in journals, scientific magazines and interviews) in the period from 2014 to 2023. Findings showed that the Alfaletar Project is structured in: progressive goals in Portuguese Language (from Early Childhood Education to the Elementary School 5th grade) and in diagnostic strategies that guide teaching work; four principles (continuity, integration, systematization and monitoring); and education actions that support pedagogical practice, advising teachers in the interpretation of diagnoses and preparation of plans that take into account the children's diversity. Therefore, it represents an educational innovation, as it brings about improvements in teaching and learning processes, in educational institutions, and consequently in the quality of education in the municipality. This organization represents an educational innovation by recovering, within the scope of conceptions and actions, the teaching protagonism.

Keywords: Education. Alfaletar Project. Professional development of teachers. Innovation. Curriculum.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a formação e as ações pedagógicas inovadoras que compõem o Projeto Alfaletar, desenvolvido na Rede Municipal de Ensino de Lagoa Santa-MG. Busca conhecer as concepções epistemológicas que orientam a formação continuada para o desenvolvimento profissional docente nessa Rede de Ensino e apreender as proposições curriculares que norteiam o ensino da leitura e da escrita nesse município. A metodologia privilegiou a investigação do tipo bibliográfica (artigos publicados em periódicos científicos e entrevistas) no período de 2014 a 2023. Os resultados apontaram que o Projeto Alfaletar está estruturado em: metas em progressão em Língua Portuguesa (da Educação Infantil ao 5º ano do Ensino Fundamental) e estratégias de diagnóstico que orientam o trabalho docente; quatro princípios (continuidade, integração, sistematização e acompanhamento); e ações de formação que subsidiam a prática pedagógica, assessorando os docentes na interpretação dos diagnósticos e na elaboração de planejamentos que contemplem a diversidade das crianças. Essa organização representa uma inovação educacional por recuperar, no âmbito das concepções e dos fazeres, o protagonismo docente.

Palavras-chave: Educação. Projeto Alfaletar. Desenvolvimento profissional docente. Inovação. Currículo.

Resumen

Este estudio analiza la formación para el desarrollo profesional docente y las acciones pedagógicas innovadoras que componen el Proyecto Alfaletar, desarrollado en la Red Municipal de Educación de Lagoa Santa-MG. Busca comprender los conceptos epistemológicos que orientan la educación continua para el desarrollo profesional docente en esa Red Educativa y comprender las propuestas curriculares que orientan la enseñanza de lectura y escritura en ese Municipio. Esta experiencia es considerada referente para las redes educativas de todo el país. La metodología privilegió la investigación bibliográfica (artículos publicados en revistas científicas y entrevistas) en el período de 2014 a 2023. Los hallazgos Señalan que el Proyecto Alfaletar está estructurado en: metas progresivas en Lengua Portuguesa (desde Educación Infantil hasta el 5º año de la Enseñanza Primaria) y en estrategias diagnósticas que orientan el trabajo docente; cuatro principios (continuidad, integración, sistematización y monitoreo); y acciones formativas que apoyen la práctica pedagógica, asesorando a los docentes en la interpretación de diagnósticos y en la elaboración de planes que consideren la diversidad de los niños. Por tanto, representa una innovación educativa, ya que genera mejoras en los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje, en las instituciones educativas y, en consecuencia, en la calidad de la educación en el municipio. Esta organización representa una innovación educativa al recuperar, en el ámbito de las concepciones y acciones, el protagonismo docente.

Palabras clave: Educación. Proyecto Alfaletar. Desarrollo profesional docente. Innovación. Plan de estudios.

Introduction

Access to and the guarantee of a quality education need to be within the scope of public law. However, to change education, rethinking teacher education is necessary. Continuing education represents an important factor in the process of professional development (Nóvoa, 2019). Occurring throughout one's professional life, it involves topics related to teaching work, career, salaries, among others.

Nonetheless, the constant changes in teacher education policies and the constant permanent shifts in direction hinder the development of solid and consistent practices that ensure learning for all students, particularly those in public schools. Discontinuity of these policies and the precarious working conditions have become the main factor responsible for insufficient levels of school performance (Perfeito; Perfeito; Oliveira-Mendes, 2024).

The impacts on student learning caused concerns that motivated the professor and researcher Magda Soares¹ to build the Alfaletar Project: “[...] Why have we spent decades and decades fighting for quality public education and never managed to achieve that quality? Is it possible to have quality in public education? How? What are the ways to achieve it?” (Soares, 2014, p. 147-148).

Alfaletar Project, created in 2007 in Lagoa Santa-MG, began with the inauguration of the Literacy and Reading Center, with the support of the municipal administration and the Education Department of the municipality in Minas Gerais, in partnership with technicians and teachers to serve Early Childhood Education and the initial years of Elementary School (Cassiano; Araújo, 2018). Its construction was aimed at addressing social inequalities and improving the quality of learning in public education. Its motto is “Reading and writing, a right of every child” (Lagoa Santa, 2015, p. 1). Soares (2020a) argues that all children can learn to read and write through a process that considers literacy and reading comprehension as inseparable and interdependent, and that it is the teacher’s responsibility to understand their dimensions or facets and different teaching methodologies.

This is a comprehensive project, structured around progressive goals, from preschool to the 5th year of elementary school; and professional development strategies for teachers focusing on network building; conducting learning assessments; and holding exhibitions of teaching materials created by the teachers and children (Mainardes; Silva; Cartaxo, 2020).

The project reached the entire country (Mainardes; Silva; Cartaxo, 2020) through research, attracting scholars from different regions. Its constitution is not seen as coming from above or from outside, as it is built by the Network, a project of the Network, erected with the support of the Nucleus (Soares, 2014). This has ensured that municipal administrations change, and the project continues. For bringing about significant improvements in the quality of teaching and learning for children in the Municipal School System², it represents an innovative experience, since “innovation is a mixture of education and context” (Imberón, 2012, p. 97).

But *what does innovation mean?* Innovation is not about inventing, it’s about “recreating, covering something with an unthought idea” (Nogaro; Battestin, 2016, p. 360). However, there is a need to be wary of subterfuges that disguise old practices with new appearances (Nogaro; Battestin, 2016). Its meaning is linked to different conceptions. Different authors discuss the connotations of this concept in the educational process, as it comprises a multifaceted epistemological field.

Then, *what does it mean to innovate in education?* For Nogaro and Battestin (2016, p. 363), it constitutes “thinking strategically and acting with a clear direction”, it includes direct connections to the right to a quality education and considers teachers as key players in this process, since without their participation, change does not happen. Nóvoa (2014) conceives of it as a process, an attitude, a way of being and acting in education that requires time, persistent

¹ Emeritus Professor of the Federal University of Minas Gerais and creator of the Alfaletar Project.

² In the indices collected between 2005 and 2023, the municipal school system of Lagoa Santa-MG obtained the following results: in 2005, the IDEB score was 4.6; in 2007, 4.5; in 2009, 4.8; in 2011, 5.7; in 2013, 5.9; in 2015, 6.2; in 2017, 6.4; in 2019, 6.2; in 2021, 5.9; in 2023, 5.9 (INEP, 2023). *Translator’s Note: IDEB is the acronym for the Basic Education Development Index, an indicator created to assess the quality of public education in Brazil.

and motivating action, and demands effort in continuous reflection and evaluation by the various participants. Carbonell (2002, p. 19) further explains that it involves intervening, deciding with intentionality and systematization, modifying attitudes, ideas, cultures, content, models and pedagogical practices, introducing “new projects and programs, curricular materials, teaching and learning strategies, didactic models and other ways of organizing and managing the curriculum, the school and the dynamics of the classroom”.

In view of this, the purpose of this study is to analyze continuing education for teachers’ professional development and the innovative pedagogical actions that comprise the Alfaletrar Project, developed in the Municipal Education Network of Lagoa Santa-MG. Specific objectives are: a) knowing the epistemological conceptions that guide continuing education for the professional development of teachers in this Education Network; and b) understanding the curriculum guidelines that govern the teaching of reading and writing in this municipality. Therefore, it seeks to answer: *What has ensured the continuity and consolidation of the Alfaletrar Project? What strategies have contributed to improving learning outcomes in the municipality? Why do its actions contribute to innovative teacher education?* The aim is to encourage discussion about the experiences of this project in the fields of teacher education, literacy, and reading and writing skills, with a view to improving learning outcomes.

To construct the information, a bibliographic investigation was carried out based on existing studies about the Project, which, according to Gil (2002), assists in reflective and critical exercise. The inclusion criteria for the papers were the chosen scope and an understanding of how it was constructed and developed, a process that also led to interviews with Magda Soares. Eight papers published in CAPES Journals Portal were found, covering the period from 2014 to 2023 (Soares, 2014; Silva, 2018; Cassiano; Araújo, 2018; Monteiro; Maciel, 2018; Morais, 2018; Montuani; Souza, 2022; Miranda; Silva, 2023; Montuani; Souza 2023); four interviews with the project’s creator (Soares, 2016; 2018; 2020b; 2022) published on the Center for Literacy, Reading and Writing Portal (Ceale in its Portuguese acronym) of UFMG, in national journals; and an interview with Cassiano³ (Cassiano; Rocha; Goulart, 2023). The texts were organized, explored, and subsequently the categories for the analyses were defined: epistemological conceptions, formative principles, work dynamics, curriculum organization, didactic-pedagogical processes, monitoring/assessment of learning, and planning.

To support the discussions, studies on teacher professional development and pedagogical innovation presented by authors such as Araújo, Cavalcanti and Loyolla (2019); Carbonell (2002); Freitas (2007); Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (2003); Imbernón (2012; 2010; 2009; 2006; 2000); Masetto (2012); Méndez (2015); Messina (2001); Nogaro and Battestin (2016); Nóvoa (2014; 2002; 2009; 1997); Tardif (2012); Tardif and Raymond (2000); Zabalza and Cerdeiriña (2014) were used as theoretical input, among others, including researchers in the field of literacy and reading education.

The first section presents the theoretical framework, discussing the relationship between teacher professional development and educational innovation; the second one presents the epistemological conceptions, formative principles, and work dynamics that guide continuing education for teacher professional development within the context of the Alfaletrar Project; and the third section explains the curriculum proposals, the didactic-pedagogical processes, the monitoring of learning, and the planning that guide the teaching of reading and writing in the Municipal School System of Lagoa Santa. Finally, the concluding remarks are presented.

Continuing education for teacher professional development and educational innovation

Within the Brazilian context, continuing teacher education faces the challenge of keeping up with the social context, seeking to respond to emerging educational demands and innovating pedagogical processes to guarantee learning outcomes. Education proposals need to be consistent with contemporary times, because by being based on a

³ Coordinator of the Literacy and Reading Center at the Municipal Education Department of Lagoa Santa-MG, since January 2023, following the death of Professor Magda Soares.

conservative approach to content transmission, they disregard protagonism, creativity, imagination, critical thinking, and inventiveness as constructs for educational innovation.

Imbernón (2000, p. 23) emphasizes that innovation in schools needs to be considered through the concept of teacher professionalization, which suggests breaking with “inertias and practices of the past passively assumed as intrinsic elements of the profession”. Pedagogical innovation is not established solely using digital technologies, but by a break with traditional patterns.

In the business world, using technology means that innovation is essential for survival. In education, innovation focuses on improving the teaching and learning process, seeking solutions and methodologies for each student’s profile. Pedagogical innovation is associated with change and involves different contexts, such as teaching programs, school, curriculum, among others (Carbonell, 2002). Innovation expands pedagogical autonomy and makes schools more democratic, attractive, and stimulating places, promoting the acquisition of knowledge. Both change and innovation are personal experiences that acquire a particular meaning in practice, as they serve both collective and individual interests (Carbonell, 2002).

For Messina (2001, p. 226), innovating means moving “away from continuity, instinct, and automatic behavior to reflect, question, and seek new ways of thinking, acting, and dreaming”, because in education there are repeated practices that do not produce effective results. Tardif (2012) emphasizes that reinterpretation and reflection on knowledge and pedagogical practice motivate teachers to seek new paths for their professional development. This makes practice a source of knowledge and an epistemological basis (Masetto, 2012).

The commitment to change prompts reflection on *what they do it, how they do it, and why they do it*, which implies curriculum development, the resolution of problematic situations, and the improvement of the educational institution. The school is an environment conducive to fostering education, as it constitutes a collective space for reflection on practice and the exchange of experiences (Imbernón, 2000; 2012). “Good education fosters innovation, and in situations of scarcity, it provokes a just demand” (Imbernón, 2010, p. 36) for a policy that promotes greater reach and a first step within education systems.

Nóvoa (2002, p. 23) states that continuous learning is centered on two pillars: “the teacher, as an agent, and the school, as a place of permanent professional growth”. By converging with *school culture*, professional development is an inherent necessity for teaching practice and “a right and a condition of the new culture that we intend to establish” (Freitas, 2007, p. 18).

From this perspective, according to Nóvoa (2019, p. 11), continuing education fulfills “its role in the professional development of teachers”. However, Marcelo Garcia (1999) reminds us that, in addition to being an intentional development action, to be related to teacher professional development, it needs to contribute to generating practical and strategic knowledge, that is, to bring about concrete benefits for the teachers and for the environment in which they work.

The complexity and analytical capacity inherent in daily school life allow teachers a deep understanding of their role in the formation of students and reinforce the idea that continuous professional development represents a commitment to the permanent construction of knowledge (Nóvoa, 1997). In terms of the collective aspect, Carbonell (2002, p. 112), when discussing innovation, argues that this culture, when introduced into schools, needs to progress towards the formation of “networks that transform into collectives of pedagogical renewal that think and move towards a different school together with other social movements; the only way to change the school”.

From this perspective, “the most solid and fruitful continuous professional development is that which is learned from reflection on innovative practices; the one that forces us to modify the original proposals regarding conceptions of teaching and learning”, in which experience leads to reflection, and reflection is supported by experience, allowing for personal, ideological, professional transformation (Carbonell, 2002, p. 112-113). Then, it contributes to enabling professionals to adopt a critical, reflective stance regarding their practice, assisting them in their own education, with a view to developing autonomy and building their professional identity (Nóvoa, 2002).

Considering the above, it is essential that schools organize themselves into collectives where teachers can reflect on what they do. Teaching education activities benefit innovative experiences by being geared towards questioning the traditional teaching model, self-evaluating teaching practices, developing teaching strategies and explaining different methodologies, monitoring results, engaging in dialogue with peers, and promoting self-training. So, the teachers think about and implement mediations anchored in frameworks that engage with learning pathways, because an innovative formative process arises from a deep understanding of the complexities involved in public schools and from planning aimed at promoting change.

With this approach, the next section explains how the Alfaletar Project was conceived and implemented, revealing the epistemological conceptions, formative principles, and work dynamics that guide the training for professional teacher development as a means of improving the goals of literacy education.

Professional teacher development in Lagoa Santa

In 2007, Magda Soares and the Municipal Education Department of Lagoa Santa, Minas Gerais, conceived the Alfaletar Project to promote the training of teachers to work in teaching reading and writing in the public schools of the municipality. The foundation and objective of the project are based on the idea that children can “appropriately and competently master reading and writing” (Lagoa Santa, 2015, p. 1). At the time, the municipality had 18 schools. The project initially included the 3rd, 4th and 5th grades, developing as a pilot project, involving only two institutions. Subsequently, it was expanded to include Early Childhood Education and the 1st and 2nd grades of Elementary School, thus encompassing the entire school system. In taking on this challenge, the teachers’ education was anchored in the school context and linked to the theoretical knowledge produced by academia (Miranda; Silva, 2023).

The Alfaletar Project operates from the perspective of *continuous network-based education*, not *continuous education within a network*. Soares (2014) distinguished the terms making clear the change has a purpose: *continuous education within a network* refers to a collaboration between the Ministry of Education, universities, and municipalities that, organized in a network, offer courses to teachers in service, considering the participation of the states in the programs launched by the Federal Government. These characteristics treat the group of teachers as homogeneous. In *continuous network-based education* there is no hierarchical organization, everything is structured collectively, where a group of people share the same commitments and work in the same direction to achieve the same goals. This perspective encompasses the entire network: all teachers, all administrators, all professionals working in all schools, with the goal of promoting improvements in the quality of education (Soares, 2014).

For Soares (2014), one of the factors that weakens *continuous education within a network* is the limited participation of education professionals in the development of actions, and the construction of the stages and content that will be offered in the courses. Alternatively, *network-based education* transforms into collectives for pedagogical renewal, according to Imbernon (2000). In addition to being fundamental for preparing teachers for and in change, through the development of reflective capacities in a group setting, it paves the way for true shared professional autonomy, since the teaching profession needs to share knowledge with the context.

The project team consists of a general coordinator, initially Magda Soares⁴, currently teacher Janair Cândida Cassiano, of Municipal Department of Education, two teachers who perform administrative and pedagogical activities, and another teacher representative from each school (Cassiano; Rocha; Goulart, 2023; Montuani; Souza, 2022). Work dynamics involve the coordinator acting as a liaison between the Literacy and Reading Nucleus and the Municipal Education Department of Lagoa Santa, which is responsible for organizing the logistics for its operation (Cassiano; Araújo, 2018). The teachers representing the schools in the Nucleus are the link between the schools and the Alfaletar Project. Nominated by their peers, these professionals are responsible for continuously monitoring, assisting, guiding, and listening to teachers regarding their questions, needs, and suggestions, and therefore do not assume classroom

⁴ Professor Magda Soares worked on Alfaletar Project until her death on January 1st, 2023.

teaching duties. They are responsible for sharing with their colleagues, monthly, the discussions and studies developed in the weekly seminars of the Nucleus (Cassiano; Araújo, 2018; Soares, 2014).

What is developed at the Nucleus reaches the schools through these representatives. They convey, in the seminars, the questions and demands of the teachers, so that they can be analyzed and discussed, and then they return to the schools to discuss the matter further. As these processes are clarified, new teaching procedures are suggested and tested in the classroom (Cassiano; Araújo, 2018). According to Soares (2014), the creativity of those who create daily procedures and strategies is surprising. "There is a sense of solidarity among the teachers and a shared commitment to the children's learning" (Soares, 2018, p. 934). By combining context and training, an innovative experience is created, as Imbérnon (2012) states.

With this understanding, the Alfaletar Project consists of "professional development in the context of teaching practice: from the experiences, problems, difficulties, and doubts that it raises at every moment", because in all professions, it is after initial training, in the exercise of the profession, that people develop proficiencies that only practice makes possible (Soares, 2014, p. 151).

Freitas (2007) states that continuing education, from the perspective of professional development, involves mechanisms for monitoring pedagogical practice, periodic evaluation of the actions undertaken, and identification of training needs, based on the needs revealed by teachers in the exercise of their professional activity, which requires flexibility in training actions, as is the case in the Alfaletar Project. Furthermore, "attentive listening by the teacher regarding their experiences" (Perfeito; Perfeito; Oliveira-Mendes, 2024, p. 10). The learning process of teachers mobilizes, at the same time, their personal characteristics, their life experiences, and their professional experiences, as well as educational ones. According to Imbérnon (2009, p. 49), continuing education needs to "foster the personal, professional and institutional development of teachers, enhancing collaborative work to change practice".

Collaborative work based on social learning, teamwork, sharing of ideas, and knowledge construction benefits the teacher training process and professional practice, since learning to share planning, execution, and reflection on the procedures implicit in project development creates situations for the construction of knowledge, it helps in working with the diversity of interests and skills within a group (Araújo; Cavalcanti; Loyolla, 2019). Continuing professional development promotes the constant learning of teachers, and in a cooperative way, it connects the basic knowledge provided by initial training with new knowledge to contextualize them (Imbérnon, 2009).

Innovative teachers are available to interact with their peers and understand these occasions as opportunities to learn. They consider the group as a means of expanding and appreciating experiences, listening to other points of view, and engaging in dialogue around a common theme or problem. "Providing time for reflection and debate, structured and planned around specific situations, can bring about changes at different levels in pedagogical practice" (Leal; Ferreira, 2011, p. 382). Emphasis is placed on the value given to "teacher experience and authorship in the formative process built within the Network" (Montuani; Souza, 2023, p. 3).

In that regard, teacher education in Lagoa Santa is carried out "through the professional development of all teachers in the Municipal Education Network, in the area of literacy and reading skills", including teachers who work in Early Childhood Education and the early years of Elementary School (Soares, 2014, p. 154). It is emphasized that the professional development of teachers, when structured from the perspective of continuous network-based education, has well-established strategies. With ongoing support, teachers are assisted and helped to rethink their practices, committing themselves to the learning of their students.

Imbérnon (2006) states that, beyond filling gaps and providing occasional courses, the concept of continuing education aims at the professional development of teachers within the context of their practice, reflecting doubts and problems in a contextualized manner. For Soares (2014), continuing education courses, while filling in gaps, ignore what teachers already know, their knowledge about teaching and learning, the possibilities and limitations of the school context, forcing them to reconstruct the concept of practice and its relationship with theories. Therefore, she argues that it is presumptuous to consider that they are educating the teachers, because the teachers are learning just as much as those who are training them, as they are all developing professionally. This is one of the principles of the Alfaletar Project.

Soares (2020b, p. 386) emphasizes that it's pointless to take a course that teaches how to teach literacy, because there is a need to "experience this challenge with guidance on what needs to be done for the child to learn". In everyday school life, the relationship between theory and practice is complex, but of great richness and potential. What empowers teachers, that is, what guarantees student learning, are the studies and discussions of the relationships between practice and theory (Soares, 2014).

Then, teachers' education in Lagoa Santa, by starting from problem situations or case studies, helps in generating alternatives for change in the context in which teaching takes place (Imberón, 2009). Innovative teachers value real-life situations for learning new concepts and thinking about didactic processes; they are an active individual who participates intensively and reflectively, building their intelligence and identity through dialogue with their peers; they are authors of knowledge; and they possess a creative mindset that supports change (Araújo; Cavalcanti; Loyolla, 2019).

Therefore, constructivism is suggested as an epistemology, since continuing education needs to be transformed, emphasizing the role of the teacher and encouraging the creation of situations relevant to schoolwork (Araújo; Cavalcanti; Loyolla, 2019). This is like what happens in the context of the Alfaletar Project, which while highlighting the role of the teacher, does not diminish the centrality of the learning process, that is, the leading role of the student.

By engaging with real-world contexts, they learn to develop collaborative projects as a central approach to solving problem situations and innovating educational processes, which includes interdisciplinarity and the principles of learning by doing, combined with a solid foundation of scientific knowledge (Araújo; Cavalcanti; Loyolla, 2019). This method for teachers' education in this municipality in Minas Gerais differs from traditional methods (Araújo; Cavalcanti; Loyolla, 2019). Through interaction and the sharing of studies, problems are identified, and solutions are collaboratively found that enhance teachers' professional skills.

Having consolidated these aspects regarding the professional development of teachers in Lagoa Santa, it is concluded that the Alfaletar Project is innovative and bold for combining theories and research with didactic processes (teaching and learning), in addition to restoring, within the scope of concepts and practices, the leading role of both teachers and students. With these reflections in mind, the next section aims to show how curricular and didactic-pedagogical propositions are disseminated, as well as how these guidelines are integrated into teacher education, in monitoring learning and in planning, combining different strategies for teaching reading and writing.

Curricular proposals that support the Alfaletar Project

The first action of the Alfaletar Project, coordinated by Magda Soares, involved bringing together weekly the teachers representing each school to reflect on their practices and develop specific goals for each school year, which were widely discussed in the development of the curriculum for the Municipal School System of Lagoa Santa. The teacher representatives organized meetings in their schools, bringing and expanding the discussions, forming a network that encompassed all the schools. These goals are reviewed every two years, considering the progress of the students and teachers (Soares, 2020b; 2014).

These actions are aligned with the perspective by Zabalza and Cerdeiriña (2014), who conceive the curriculum as a training project, comprehensive to the institution and the basis for educational innovation. Any innovation proposed individually, in a group, or by the institution, must be a *creative and innovative interpretation* of the Center Project and the basic education ideas contained within it. When individuals or groups independently incorporate their own innovations, the phenomenon known as the jacuzzi model of innovation⁵ emerges, in which multiple initiatives with different orientations come to disrupt the dynamics of a school's curriculum.

The project's objectives, when considered in a progressive manner, allow teachers to visualize what is taught throughout the school years. The curriculum organized by goals (Lagoa Santa, 2015) presents the necessary skills and

⁵ This phenomenon is used in international literature to indicate *scattered initiatives* (Zabalza; Cerdeiriña, 2014).

knowledge for the stages of Early Childhood Education (Nursery, Preschool I and Preschool II) and Elementary Education (1st to 5th grade), ensuring the continuity, integration, and systematization of the curriculum components.

To assimilate this progression and learn how to put it into practice, studies were conducted over the years in seminars coordinated by Magda Soares, which provided constant professional development because they brought theoretical reflection closer to classroom reality, discussing the goals, their cognitive and linguistic foundations, and how to translate them into teaching procedures, exchanging experiences and systematizing content (Soares, 2014). These study sessions are valuable and help to understand the pathways of practice towards children's learning.

The four principles of the Project permeate the study of the curricular components and guarantee the formation of a network by being part of the constitution of a common curriculum for all schools (Montuani; Souza, 2022). The principle of *continuity* is conceived as a *continuum* in which content and skills are developed in an *integrated* and *systematic* way throughout Early Childhood Education and the Initial Years of Elementary School. At the beginning of the *systematization process*, teaching is organized in a sequence that follows the children's learning process and prepares them for what will come next. This *systematization* requires continuous *monitoring* to determine whether *continuity*, *integration*, and *systematization* guarantee the quality of learning (Soares, 2014).

Through these principles, the Project has ensured that teaching functions with continuity and integration within each cycle and between one cycle and another: a cycle of introduction to literacy and reading comprehension, which takes place from nursery school (zero to three years old) to kindergarten II (four and five years old), followed by the basic cycle, from the 1st to the 3rd year (six to eight years old), in which literacy is completed and reading and writing skills are further developed, followed by the cycle encompassing the 4th and 5th years (nine and ten years old), in which spelling is perfected, always within a literacy context (Soares, 2020a; 2014).

To guide this *integration* and *continuity*, the components of the literacy and reading process are distributed throughout the cycles: phonological awareness is developed in early childhood education, alongside reading and writing texts, knowledge of the alphabet, and relating letters to the sounds of words; starting in the 1st year, the curriculum progresses from writing individual words to producing texts, reading and comprehending texts, and reflecting on language, encompassing both literacy and language development. Phonological awareness, knowledge of letters, reading and writing words refer to literacy itself, while the others are in the field of reading skills development (Soares, 2014).

These components are organized in what is most fundamental in the Alfaletar Project: organization in *continuity*, *integration*, and *systematization* through the definition of learning goals established for each cycle and year. They define what every child has the right to learn at each stage and constitute the principle of *monitoring* the literacy and reading development process. To monitor this continuous, *integrated*, and *systematized* process, periodic assessments are conducted for each class. The instruments are based on a matrix developed by Nucleus in partnership with the teachers in the schools (Soares, 2014).

Therefore, the curriculum proposal of Lagoa Santa (2020) is organized into components such as: phonological awareness, knowledge of letters, conceptualization of writing, word reading, shared reading strategies, reading conventions, adherence to reading practices, conventional writing, shared writing, writing conventions, expression and comprehension. For Morais and Silva (2023), this expansion suggests a meticulous process of detailing goals, which made possible the collective process of professional development combined with periodic diagnostic evaluation.

Theoretical concepts that inspire the project are based on research by Ferreiro and Teberosky, who seek to understand the hypotheses developed by children in the acquisition of alphabetic writing. Monitoring learning and teaching involves continuous observations and records, carried out by the teachers based on three annual assessments (Morais, 2018), at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. Planned collectively based on the anticipated goals, not as an assessment of students, teachers or schools (Soares, 2020b), the assessments identify what the children in each grade have learned and the difficulties to overcome, allowing the creation of a profile for each class (Morais, 2018).

For Soares (2022), as teacher educators, the ideal situation is to be inside the schools, monitoring the work to help with analysis, since external evaluations do not explain how to make the most urgent pedagogical choices.

Thereunto, is essential to "adopt an attitude of empathy, understanding, and collaboration with others" (Soares, 2022, p. 388). This can only be achieved through close monitoring of the children, their progress and difficulties.

The project places assessment at the service of formative goals, as a resource for learning, innovation, support, and reinforcement to reduce the failure rate (Méndez, 2015). Through these actions, assessment helps students learn more and better and simultaneously assists teachers in understanding the causes of learning difficulties so they can teach more effectively. According to Méndez (2015), this ethical attitude of responsibility towards the student and the stance taken transforms limited and unproductive practices into a formative perspective, making assessment a resource for improving teaching and learning processes, ensuring the progress of the learner's development, because this is the most rational, committed, and generous way to practice assessment, demonstrating its integration with the curriculum (Hargreaves; Earl; Ryan, 2003).

Méndez (2015) reaffirms the valuable role of assessment, considering it as a source of learning and an essential resource for ensuring quality learning. Through assessment, which goes beyond mere examination and includes reflection, dialogue, inquiry, searching, and debate, learning acquires meaning. Without assessment, it becomes a mechanical and routine task. Ultimately, innovation and transformation become possible through changing the ways in which assessment is carried out.

Similarly, the municipality's curriculum proposal is continuously improved, with expectation of adjusting the learning objectives to the teaching practices to be implemented (Morais, 2018). Monteiro and Maciel (2018) clarify that records and analyses lead to a review of pedagogical practice, established goals, the planning of methodological strategies, and school routines. They guide the individual and collective training plan, recognizing the theoretical contributions necessary for understanding and proposing teaching practices.

Morais (2018) emphasizes the concept of a living curriculum and the collective commitment to children's learning, highlighting the innovation that characterizes the curriculum proposal of the municipality of Lagoa Santa: construction and reconstruction of the curriculum within a network-based continuing education project, in which the goals are intertwined with the diagnostic and monitoring procedure of learning, with planning and study, and with the depth and detail of this proposal in relation to what needs to be prioritized in teaching literacy and the alphabetic writing system from early childhood education onwards. It adds to teacher autonomy the right to decide "what and how to teach in their classrooms, to meet the needs of their specific students and with different learning paces and trajectories", especially in times of standardization of materials and "packages from private groups" (Morais, 2018, p. 872).

Regarding teachers' professional development, training activities have been organized to promote knowledge and understanding of the linguistic and cognitive processes involved in the initial learning of written language and their implications for guiding teaching with children. In pedagogical practice, these are the processes that teachers need to understand to translate them into procedures, methodologies, and activities that promote the monitoring and learning of children (Soares, 2014).

In the Alfaletrar Project, from early childhood education onwards, children gradually acquire alphabetical writing skills within a literacy context, through the different textual genres that circulate in society, expanding their understanding of the social uses made of them. The essential step is to make them understand the alphabetic principle, rediscovering that writing is a technology created by humanity and represents the sounds of words through arbitrary symbols, which are the letters, but not the meaning of the words, unlike a drawing (Soares, 2014). Thus, the approach is geared towards "discovering that the sound chain of words can be segmented into syllables and these into phonemes, which are abstract entities that cannot be pronounced in isolation, and which are what the letters represent" (Soares, 2014, p. 154). After understanding this principle, the child learns the spelling rules, that is, the conventions for using the alphabetic writing system.

Therefore, literacy and reading skills go hand in hand and are inextricably linked and interdependent (Soares, 2020a; 2016). The project advocates an approach to literacy in meaningful contexts, simultaneously developing the acquisition of the writing system, reading skills, and comprehension and production of different text genres. There are

no specific methods, methodologies, or pre-defined teaching materials (Cassiano; Araújo, 2018). Teachers have autonomy in relation to the reality that surrounds them.

Understanding the cognitive and linguistic processes that children experience when learning to read and write, as well as the difficulties they face are often caused by a lack of adequate guidance (Soares, 2014). With the purpose of helping students navigate these processes without difficulty, the teachers create activities to develop the project proposals in partnership with the Nucleus.

These proposals are presented at exhibitions that take place once a year. In odd-numbered years, the *Paralfaletar* exhibition showcases procedures, teaching materials, and games created by teachers for literacy and reading instruction (Silva, 2018). This exhibition includes teachers from the municipality and other neighboring municipalities, community members, and students from Pedagogy courses at universities in the region. In even-numbered years, the *Alfalendo* exhibition showcases the work produced by children based on children's literature books read and discussed throughout the year (Silva, 2018; Cassiano; Araújo, 2018; Soares, 2014).

The approach to teacher professional development, by bringing a reflective and formative character, allows literacy teachers to identify the time and space in which reading activities and the acquisition of the alphabetical writing system should be distributed in the classroom routine, ensuring that they occur appropriately. In both exhibitions, activities are developed that consider the three facets of literacy (Silva, 2018), psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistics (Soares, 2004).

In addition to producing teaching resources and lesson plans in an interface with literacy, the teachers are encouraged to write the text that guides the mediations so that each resource can be used by other teachers, "including topics such as: class, game name, methodological component, objectives, materials, game organization, game development and rules" (Montuani; Souza, 2023, p. 4). This production reveals the formative potential of these exhibitions, as there is a sharing of knowledge among teachers from the network and from other educational networks and universities. The project is a *laboratory* in which theoretical and methodological dimensions are studied and compared, in practices that value teacher authorship, in the proposals for creating games and didactic resources to teach children to read and write (Montuani; Souza, 2023).

Promptly, in the processes of creation, experimentation, mediation, and reflection regarding the materials and resources developed by the teachers of Lagoa Santa, the construction and development of pedagogical knowledge (Tardif; Raymond, 2000) mediated by formative instances are identified (Montuani; Souza, 2023). Teacher education, when constructed within the school environment, through interaction among individuals, the focus is on "problems to be solved", and not on "content to be transmitted" (Nóvoa, 2002, p. 40).

According to Monteiro and Maciel (2018), the Alfaletar Project has been acquiring theoretical and practical consistency regarding aspects of the teaching and learning process, expanding dialogue and teacher participation in pedagogical decisions over the years. Teachers' education experience has promoted both the acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge and the development of autonomy in developing innovative methodologies appropriate to the reality of each classroom (Silva, 2018).

As Araújo, Cavalcanti, and Loyolla (2019) point out, these activities, as active methodologies, encourage students to participate intensely in classes, and with teacher mediation, they go beyond the mere transmission of knowledge. Then, education focused on professional development conceives of the student as an active subject who constructs their intelligence and identity through dialogue with their peers and with the teachers, as authors of knowledge, and not merely as reproducers of it (Araújo; Cavalcanti; Loyolla, 2019).

It is worth noting that one of the first steps in implementing the Alfaletar Project was the installation of libraries in all schools. Since the creation of the Nucleus, literature has been mentioned as one of the guiding principles (Monteiro; Maciel, 2018). Therefore, the creation of libraries was a condition for the continuation of the project. By the end of 2007, all schools had *literary libraries* that focused on children's literacy (Soares, 2014), considered *the heart of the Project*, as they ensured that students had the desire to be in contact with quality texts and recognized authors (Cassiano; Araújo, 2018). In teachers' education, a systematic approach is followed, with clearly defined guidelines for

teachers to develop a weekly plan, including specific activities related to reading or storytelling and a weekly visit to the library (Montuani; Souza, 2023). Rocha and Maciel (2024) emphasize that these activities occur daily in the routine of the classrooms.

Nogaro and Battestin (2016) highlight planning as a reflective, continuous, and dynamic process that requires clarity about where one is and where one wants to go. Reflection on practice awakens the need for change and brings about transformations. According to the authors, defining strategies and objectives is essential for innovative pedagogical practice which, on a larger scale, leads to an innovative school and education.

It is understood that children's learning processes in relation to written language, as well as the nature and characteristics of this object, are fundamental components for education of literacy educators. The lack of this knowledge underlies Brazil's failure to achieve literacy (Soares, 2020a). However, "groups of researchers ignore that this process comprises and/or integrates subsequent stages of language use" (Perfeito; Perfeito; Oliveira-Mendes, 2024, p. 12).

The analysis in this study confirms the investment in the quality of reading and writing instruction based on "the involvement of teachers in Lagoa Santa in continuous professional development, monitoring of teaching work and children's development, and the production of teaching resources" (Montuani; Souza, 2023, p. 9). According to Cassiano and Araújo (2018, p. 840), what empowers teachers and ensures student learning "are the studies and discussions of the relationships between practice and theory in the seminars".

In that regard, Soares (2020b) considered that educational networks, when building their own curricular foundations and goals for the literacy and reading cycle and for Early Childhood Education, become fully satisfactory when adopted by the teachers because this type of collaborative construction provides effective involvement in the teaching of the curriculum. Montuani and Souza (2022) make it clear that teachers feel more secure when they have a clear understanding of what needs to be worked on and the methodologies to be used.

For Carbonell (2002, p. 31), collaboration "takes root where there is a strong and stable teaching team with an open attitude towards change and a willingness to share objectives for the improvement or transformation of the school". What is sought is an innovation that "[...] resides in the collective, is part of the professional culture and is incorporated into educational processes as a normal mode of operation" (Imbernón, 2009, p. 63), as the experience in Lagoa Santa, for instance. This is the main intention of continuous professional development, as the ability to engage in dialogue contributes to group formation and innovation in the school (Nóvoa, 2009).

With these characteristics, Alfaletar Project is an incentive to think about teacher training for Early Childhood Education and Elementary School. "It is a project that results from the choices of the teachers, from their continuous contribution to its improvement and advancement" (Soares, 2020b, p. 199). Then, there is no denying that training is one of the pillars for a quality education (Miranda; Silva, 2023).

Teacher education programs and/or projects need to undergo reforms to meet the continuous and specific demands of these professionals (Miranda; Silva, 2023). For them to be effective, they need to be aligned with the school's needs and provide teachers with opportunities for critical reflection and practical application of the knowledge acquired.

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze continuing education for teacher professional development and the innovative pedagogical actions that comprise the Alfaletar Project, developed in the Municipal Education Network of Lagoa Santa-MG. The following specific objectives were adopted: understanding the epistemological conceptions that guide teacher professional development in this municipality and grasping the curricular propositions that guide the teaching of reading and writing in this school system.

With these purposes in mind, it was inferred that the Alfaletar Project is an example of successful professional development for literacy teachers, even though, according to Soares (2014), it is a micro-practice, as it presents a micro-alternative, implemented in only one municipality, also in terms of curriculum, it focuses on only one area, that of initial

reading and writing learning, which encompasses the acquisition of the alphabetic writing and spelling system, as well as the development of skills for the social use of different textual genres.

Despite this, the project has achieved results that extend beyond the municipality. It constitutes a well-designed, planned, and consolidated network policy, and that is why it has withstood the test of time and different governments. It is important to note that the training program from the perspective of teacher professional development implemented in Lagoa Santa, as well as its innovative pedagogical guidelines (Nogaro; Battestin, 2016), has been contributing to changing the scenario of failure in children's learning, as it is based on the real needs of the schools. Findings of this study highlighted important aspects that support this innovation, in accordance with the approach recommended by researchers cited throughout this text:

- a) active and collaborative participation of the individuals in the process of establishing and developing the project;
- b) appropriate strategies for professional development of teachers in exercise of their function;
- c) regular in-person training both inside and outside the school;
- d) development and recontextualization of the curriculum for the Lagoa Santa School Network, guiding the teaching and learning process through clear objectives, explicit and continuously revisited, with recognition of the need for time and spaces dedicated to reading and activities for appropriating the alphabetic writing system;
- e) the leading role and authorship of teachers in the process of constructing theoretical knowledge in dialogue with experiences lived in the daily school environment; and
- f) progress in teachers' ability to solve problems inherent in their practices, using assessment as a learning resource and a means to redirect planning, not explicitly focusing on raising external assessment scores, but on the children's progress in learning reading and writing.

These precedents point to a policy of qualifying teaching work that triggers a process of reflection on practice, giving a new meaning and influencing the knowledge involved in the acquisition of literacy and reading skills. In this process, the teacher is perceived as the protagonist, and education, in the approach of professional development, when based on the principles of *continuity, integration, systematization, and monitoring*, contributes to innovation, impacting the quality of teaching and learning processes in public schools in the municipality of Minas Gerais, since with the Alfaletar Project, teachers know *what and how to teach* (Cassiano; Araújo, 2018).

Therefore, it is necessary to consider that, on the one hand, there is a successful project, representative of the commitment to all children from lower-income classes, formulated by the legitimate agents of education (Soares, 2020), for example, the Alfaletar Project. On the other hand, states with a significant number of municipalities are adopting curricula, teaching materials, and large-scale assessments developed by private entities, which, advertised as the solution to literacy problems, have nothing to do with promoting democratic interests and Brazilian public education (Souza; Ferreira; Morais, 2024). This reflects the legacy left by the BNCC and the PNA⁶, and at the same time it suggests thinking about "what to expect from the current National Commitment Policy for Literate Children" (Souza; Ferreira; Morais, 2024, p. 18).

It should be emphasized that the purpose of continuing education is not to establish a prescriptive or salvationist approach, but to assist in the debate for a more diligent and innovative professional development of teachers. Therefore, it involves strategies that encourage reflection and the sharing of experiences, giving teachers the role of protagonists and agents in their own professional development.

⁶ Repealed in 2023 by Decree number 11,556, which established the National Commitment to Literate Children Policy (Brasil, 2023).

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