

# Commodification in Brazilian Private Higher Education and Teacher Training in Pedagogy Courses

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**Abstract:** Quantitative data from the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP) show that Brazilian higher education is concentrated in the private sector, where most of the training of early childhood and elementary education teachers is carried out. Thereby, the training of teachers in Brazil has largely assumed commodified characteristics, especially in private for-profit institutions. Thus, this ongoing research investigates the profiles of university professors with degrees from private for-profit higher education institutions (HEI) and how they evaluate their work as teachers' trainers in the Pedagogy course of an institution with the same features. The methodology is empirical, and the theoretical framework is based on Bourdieu and Dubar. As a partial result, it is possible to observe, in the evaluations these professionals make of their own work, the main characteristics they display accordingly to their position, as well as the influence of commodification on their teaching autonomy.

**Key words:** higher education, commodification, pedagogy, teachers training, college/university professors

## 1. Introduction

This research, still in progress, demonstrates, according to quantitative data from INEP (Brasil, 2019b),<sup>1</sup> that Brazilian higher education is concentrated in the private sector, where most of the training of early childhood and elementary education teachers is carried out in Pedagogy courses.<sup>2</sup> Thereby, the training of teachers in Brazil has largely assumed commodified characteristics (Rodrigues, 2007; Bianchetti & Sguissardi, 2017), especially in private for-profit institutions. The objective of this research is thus to trace a profile of the university professor whose education was provided by private for-profit higher education institutions (HEI) and who teaches or has taught in Pedagogy courses at private for-profit HEI in the city of São Paulo. It takes into account, also, the evaluation that this professional, as a teacher trainer, makes of his or her own work in this scenario.

Besides that, we intend to investigate: the commodification of Brazilian higher education within this environment; the social and cultural perspective of the university professor of private for-profit HEI (expressed in

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<sup>1</sup> The National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP, in the Portuguese acronym) was created in 1937 as the National Institute of Pedagogy. In 1997, it was converted into a federal autarchy linked to the Ministry of Education (MEC) and became the federal agency responsible for data regarding education in the country. Inep is a national and international reference in its three areas of activity: educational assessments and exams; statistical research and educational indicators; and knowledge management and educational studies (Brasil, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> In Brazil, "Pedagogia" (Pedagogy) is the title of undergraduate courses for training early childhood and elementary education teachers. So, a degree in Pedagogy in Brazil would be similar to a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) in the US and other countries.

the interviews); the working conditions of these professionals and how they impact their professional autonomy in the Pedagogy course. This investigation takes into account that the secondary socialization of children takes place, to a large extent, in the school, where they enter earlier and earlier due to the insertion of their parents in the labor market — therefore, this institution demands professionals, i.e., educators, prepared to welcome those children and work with them (Marin, 2012).

The methodology used is empirical, based on two survey instruments: the semi-structured questionnaire and the interview, which are applied to teachers — the subjects of this research — with the intention of characterizing these professionals. From the perspective of the subjects, it also seeks to build a broader quantitative and qualitative analysis of the consequences of the commodification of Brazilian private higher education on teachers training in Pedagogy courses. Data analysis uses Dubar's theoretical framework for analyzing the subjects' social and educational trajectories, and Bourdieu's for analyzing their cultural, economic and social capital, besides Harvey's concept of neoliberalism and Apple's concept of technical control, in order to support the findings. As a partial result, it is possible to observe, in the evaluations these professionals make of their own work, the main characteristics they display accordingly to their position, as well as the influence of commodification on their teaching autonomy.

## 2. Development

According to the 2018 Higher Education Census (Brasil, 2019b), of the total number of vacancies (13,529,101) in undergraduate courses that year, 93.8% (12,693,532) were offered by the private sector, and 6.2% (835,569) by public institutions. However, only 27.14% (3,445,935) of the vacancies were filled, of which 83.1% (2,864,999) were in the private sector and 16.9% (580,936) in public institutions.

In 2018, of the total number of higher education institutions — which in that year were 2,537, 88.2% were private, that is: 2,238 private institutions, against 299 public institutions. These institutions were academically organized into universities (92), university centers (217) and colleges (1,929), the latter representing 86.2% of private HEIs in the country (Brasil, 2019b).

The number of students, which in 2018 reached a total of more than 6.3 million in the private sector, represented a participation greater than 75% in the higher education system, that is, three in four undergraduate students attended a private institution (Brasil, 2019b).

Also based on the 2018 Higher and Basic Education Census (Brasil, 2019a & 2019b), it appears that in the 10 largest undergraduate courses in 2018, more than 90% of enrollments of students who attended Pedagogy were held in private HEIs, and more than 67% of enrollments were in distance learning courses (EAD).<sup>3</sup> In 2018, Pedagogy was the second course in number of enrollments, surpassed only by Law courses, and is the first among Licenciates,<sup>4</sup> with 747,511 enrollments, well above the second place, which is the Licenciature Degree in Physical Education, with 168,153 enrollments (Brasil, 2019b).

Still in 2018, there were 181,900 basic education schools and 2.2 million teachers for this level of education, with 1,352,777 teachers working in early childhood and elementary education (Brasil, 2019a). It is also observed that in higher education — due to the reduced number of public institutions, regulations such as selection processes

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<sup>3</sup> In Portuguese, the acronym EAD stands for *ensino a distância*, or “distance learning”.

<sup>4</sup> In Brazil, the undergraduate degrees are divided into bachelors and licenciates. While the first ones are aimed at educating professionals for research or clerk professions, the second ones focus only on training teachers for the different subjects and levels of education.

for new positions, in addition to the required tenure – more than half of university professors start their careers in private institutions (Gatti et al., 2019).

From the perspective of authors such as Rodrigues (2007), Bianchetti and Sguissardi (2017), some private HEIs, in general private for-profit institutions, are at the mercy of market practices and offer educational services, often at low prices, but with little or dubious quality. Others offer courses with higher quality, but at high costs, accessible only to a small portion of society. Bianchetti and Sguissardi (2017, p. 89) state: “This decision, common in the strategies of commercial companies, when applied to the sale and purchase of a product called ‘education/learning’, transforms this ‘product’ into merchandise/commodity, leading to the paroxysm of the expression ‘commodification of education’”. In this sense, Waizbord (2015) states that higher education loses its historically important role — especially when we think of the university — and ends up being seen simply as an HEI that trains, or rather offers a diploma, in order to meet the demands of industry and market, which directly affects teacher training courses, here, in particular, the Pedagogy course.

According to Gatti and colleagues (2019), this scenario also reveals the training that has been taking place and no longer meets the contemporary challenges that this level of education demands, especially from the social perspective, in which it should take place. It also leads to the fragmentation of the internship itself, which is fundamental for the consolidation of future professional teaching practices. This situation allows HEIs to “make choices and direct this training according to aspects chosen by them, but the identity of this course becomes problematic due to its broad curriculum and multiple vocations” (Gatti et al., 2019, p. 30).

To those authors, the Pedagogy course should seek a training axis that contemplates “the diversification required by the different social demands and innovative aspects of the contemporary world” (p. 13). Pedagogy courses lack depth regarding their contents, whereas a technicist pattern remains, which separates theory and practice, knowledge and action, disregarding their social function and pedagogical practice, which are fundamental for the future pedagogue/teacher. The course’s identity and training have become fragmented, mainly with the introduction of a “neoliberal agenda” and with the reconfigurations that have been taking place in higher education, especially in private institutions, which also affects the organization of the state and public policies for education (Gatti et al., 2019).

In this sense, the state tends towards a reconfiguration/reformulation of higher education based on guidelines dictated by multilateral organizations, such as the World Bank. As a consequence, there is a great involvement of the state in higher education, in addition to these reconfigurations being consistent with the lack of equity and quality in the education offered. There is no concern with research and with real and concrete knowledge, creating thus an alienating situation that makes teaching secondary. Whereas it is an essential dimension in human development, it is relegated to technical training and preparation for the labor market (Scheibe, 2000).

From the data collected, it is noticeable that most professionals who will work in early childhood and elementary education, i.e., those who will accompany the children in the continuity of their socialization process and, consequently, in their first contact with the institution, which is, therefore, an important moment of their educational and life trajectories — will be trained in this environment. To Marin (2012), the mechanisms of primary socialization, which is expected to take place in early childhood, within the family, are subject to changes, as a consequence of, for example, the inclusion of the child in day care centers in their very first years, while the school environment, she emphasizes, is supposed to be the place of their secondary socialization, outside the family. That is why the training of these professionals should not only encompass a series of steps, but also take into account the children’s previous socialization processes, as well as those they will develop, provide and be

involved in at school (Marin, 2012).

The socializing action of the school on teachers also reflects on their practices and can intensify the notion of teaching that they already have, making it necessary to reread their educational memory, so that they do not reproduce actions they experienced as students. The school cannot be seen as a “children’s warehouse”, as it is often designated, as a place of control, which prepares the child from an early age for adult life, when referring to the socialization of children and their relationship with work and their families. The school has a moral load, it is part of the process, it has practices loaded with moral readings that will influence not only socialization, but the education and life of a child at large, which makes of paramount importance the training of the professional who works in its space (Marin, 2012).

The challenge of starting a teaching career in early childhood and elementary education with the training that has been offered in undergraduate courses, especially in for-profit private HEIs, can further affect this process, which is already loaded with some tension, and also taking into account that the school environment is diverse and dynamic (Gatti et al., 2019).

Thus, the research problem arises: what are the cultural, educational and socioeconomic characteristics of the university professor trained in a private for-profit HEI, and how does he or she assess his or her work as a teacher trainer in the Pedagogy course, in this scenario?

## 2.1 Proceedings

As for the proceedings that guided the process of analysis and subsequent discussion of the data in this investigation, we started by forwarding the research project to the Ethics Committee of the university and its registration was approved in Plataforma Brasil on December 31, 2020. It was demanded from the individuals who answered the questionnaire and later participated in the interview, between February and March 2021, to accept the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF), as well as it was offered to them, at the moment of the interview, the necessary clarifications.

Data were collected based on sociological research, which, although it can be done in different ways, is always based on a theoretical model. According to Thiollent (1985), in sociological research, “its objectives are scientific, that is, defined in terms of their relevance within the problematics or theoretical traditions of sociology” (p. 38). Thiollent (1985) also considers that empirical research brings us closer to and provides an effective contact with the subjects involved in the investigated problem, so we opted for empirical research and the use of instruments applied to professors, subjects of this investigation.

The questionnaire was elaborated with questions related to the research problem, in an interrogative perspective. Its objective was to characterize the professors socio-economically and culturally, while the interview aimed to clarify in a more profound way how the professor sees him or herself within the for-profit private HEI and how he or she evaluates their responsibility in training teachers, in the material conditions in which they carry out their job. The research did not aim to work with sampling, but with a group of professors, according to the conditions of access to HEIs.

Among the items present in the questionnaire or interview, we highlight: academic education up to graduation and post-graduation, in a public, private, mixed institution; academic level (Specialist, Master’s, Doctorate); work regime (full-time, part-time, hourly); personal information and income; parents’ education and profession; whether they perform any other activity besides teaching; why the choice of a private institution and not a public one; how he/she understands the commodification of private higher education; whether they teach in

more than one course or institution; which means of transportation they use to go to the institution; pursues continued education (academic updating); the challenges faced in teaching in their work environment; whether they have a second degree; their autonomy process.

The semi-structured questionnaire — with 31 questions that identified aspects related to the cultural, economic and social capital of teachers — was sent by email, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, to 11 professors from the same private for-profit HEI. Of the 11 professors contacted, only seven fitted the determined profile, that is, they attended their graduation courses in private for-profit HEIs and have been teaching or taught in the Pedagogy course, with six of them being part of this characterization, according to the answer order. The invitation for the interview was sent by email to these six first professors who had answered the questionnaire and fitted the profile of the research; all of whom work at the same HEI.

Also due to the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews with 14 semi-structured questions were conducted online, using the Google Meet application, and had their audio recorded, as provided for in the FICF. Then, they were transcribed and organized (first part) for further data analysis, seeking to relate the interview responses with the theoretical framework.

## 2.2 Discussions and Partial Results

As discussions and partial results, we verified, according to Bianchetti and Sguissardi (2017), that the reality of private higher education in Brazil is a reflection of the “ease” of the sector, observed, above all, in public incentives and in the unrestrained expansion of private HEIs, with emphasis on for-profit institutions and the so-called private-mercantile ones. It is possible to have “the dimension of how the market perspective is presiding over the process of expanding the number of institutions — whether brand new ones or those resulting from mergers, acquisitions, etc. — and the quantitative increase of university students” (Bianchetti & Sguissardi, 2017, p. 76).

In this sense, according to the numbers of institutions, vacancies offered and enrollments, for Bianchetti and Sguissardi (2017, p. 82) “the private system suffers from elephantiasis, while the public system also expands, but in a proportion that does not even approach that of the private one”. In line with the ideas developed by Harvey (2014a) and Boito Jr (1999), we believe that this process becomes even more complex when the country is immersed in a neoliberal policy, which bets on education as a way to solve social problems, but which, at the same time, is guided by the perspective of a minimum state, which cuts public spending destined for the popular classes and threatens social rights that have been conquered.

The profile of the subjects was drawn from the data collected and analyzed, relating them to the theoretical framework used in the research, which points to professors who had their basic school trajectory in public schools; their parents, in general, have little schooling and did not have the financial resources to pay for their children’s education in a private HEI. These professors paid the private HEI with the salary of work performed along with graduation. They are, therefore, from a middle class with few economic, cultural and social resources, but who sought, through their educational trajectories, to acquire these capitals. Thus, it can be seen how the life stories and educational trajectories of the subjects studied reflect the scenario of Brazilian private higher education shown in this article, which corresponds to the scenario encompassing many for-profit institutions.

According to Dubar (1998), the trajectories of the subjects brought us relevant information, in both an objective and subjective perspective, which frequently reveals the processes of constitution of heterogeneous identity forms, often shaped by the institutions the subject attends, by the social positions he/she occupies or by

their own family. At this point, it is worth noting that we focused more on institutional processes than on biographical ones. In spite of acknowledging that the subject is everything that his or her trajectory has brought them, exploring the life history more deeply, a path full of interurrences, would demand another type of analysis, according to Bourdieu (2006).

As for the evaluation that the professor makes of the work carried out in private for-profit HEIs, despite having ensured the confidentiality of the research, we noted that some information was not fully made available. We understand that this is mainly due to job preservation, but the fact is also consistent with the perspective that some information can be intentionally “avoided” in the subject’s discourse about him or herself (Bourdieu, 2006). Still, some features observed pointed to certain possibilities and conclusions.

The works of Boito Jr (1999) and Rodrigues (2007) allow us to state that the researched institution is notoriously inserted in the scope of private for-profit HEIs and that, consequently, it follows the paths of these institutions. The subjects consider that, despite their training not always being suited to the subject they teach, and that they would need more investment from the institution to be able to teach with greater congruence, they deliver their best, aware that, even though it is not an ideal situation, it is what is possible to be done.

Within the analyzes carried out, some elements intersect, demanding from the study a separation between them, especially regarding the role of the student and that of the institution, so that the analysis would enable a better understanding of the autonomy of work in this environment. The student’s role can influence not only the way the professor has his or her work evaluated, but, consequently, their professional autonomy. Professors understand that their work is also the result of the limitations that students often impose on themselves, given the “need” of the diploma for marketing purposes. On the other hand, the institution “does not want to lose the student”, but it also does not offer an adequate library or carry out actions that encourage and disseminate reading, for example, which makes this relationship often conflicting.

### **3. Partial Final Considerations**

As partial final considerations, we have verified that in this commercialized scenario, professors are frustrated, as they know the importance of training professionals in the Pedagogy course. They make an effort, but often come up against the limitations imposed by the institution’s interests, which are guided by “profits”. They are professionals who demand attention and, as reported, are “by themselves” and, therefore, cannot take many steps. As pointed out by Gatti and colleagues (2019), they need support for performing their activities, especially in a commercialized scenario, since, in general terms, it is perceived as “precarious their recognition as trainers, as essential characters in the development of undergraduates, their teaching practice in Licentiate degrees, the knowledge that underpins the teaching practice, and their training and professional background” (p. 317), which leads us to a greater complexity that involves the structure of education itself, as a whole.

However, it can be said that all subjects of this research are responsible professors and aware of the work they do, within the conditions offered by the institution. They understand the specifics required for teaching in a Pedagogy course. They bring cultural and social aspects of their objective and even subjective trajectories and take these experiences to the classroom, also understanding that these aspects are the result of their origins and what was built along their trajectories. They are professionals who find themselves absorbed by the commodification of private higher education, linked to neoliberal politics and ideology, which, as pointed out by Rodrigues (2007), make teaching an education-commodity and a commodity-education, that is, the commodity is

embodied in the space of human development.

It is important to remember the technical control, as pointed out by Apple (2001): the result of the capitalist ideology, which disqualifies the work and requalifies it according to its interests, mainly through the curricular form, producing the isolation of the teacher. That can be perceived, for example, when the institution imposes the curriculum to be followed, failing to stimulate discussion and interaction among professors. Based on the bibliography that guides this work, as mentioned, and adding to it the notes of Gatti and colleagues (2019), we can say that all these are characteristics of the commodification of private higher education in Brazil, protected by neoliberal ideology and policies, that deal with education from a commercial perspective, to the detriment of a more humanized graduation, especially in the Pedagogy course.

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