

An Innovative Look at the Professional Insertion Experience of Teachers

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Abstract

The teaching profession faces significant challenges, including high dropout rates, especially notable among teachers in their first years of practice. This phenomenon not only has a global impact but also directly affects the Peruvian context, compromising the quality of education and increasing costs for educational systems. The literature identifies multiple factors contributing to this early attrition. In response to this problem, induction programs have been considered an effective strategy to mitigate it. The aim of this research was to analyze the professional insertion experience of novice teachers from the perspective of activity systems theory. Using a qualitative methodology and case studies, the research, implemented through semi-structured interviews, facilitated a deep understanding of the professional insertion dynamics of three secondary school teachers. The results reveal that the components of the activity system—subjects, tools, rules, division of labor, and community—are crucial for professional insertion. The findings highlight the need for effective community support, appropriate insertion tools, and policies that promote a welcoming and less stressful work environment. Improving professional insertion systems could mitigate many of the challenges faced by novice teachers, thereby increasing their retention and professional satisfaction. This systemic approach offers new perspectives for understanding professional insertion and underscores the importance of integrating all elements of the activity system to effectively support teachers in their early stages.

Keywords: teacher attrition, professional insertion, activity theory, community support, teacher retention

1. Introduction

Teacher attrition is a phenomenon that particularly affects novice teachers [1,2]. The abandonment of the teaching career is a global issue that transcends borders [3, 4], and it also affects Peru [5, 6]. This reality, in addition to compromising the quality of education [4], entails significant costs for educational systems [7, 8].

Various factors can explain the early attrition from the teaching profession. These factors include taking on the responsibility of difficult classes generally assigned to novice teachers [9, 3, 7], lack of experience and support [10], teacher workload [11, 12, 7], the disconnect between initial training and the labor market [7, 13], as well as job insecurity derived from precarious employment [14, 7].

Supporting teachers through professional insertion programs is highlighted in the scientific literature as an effective strategy to mitigate early attrition from the teaching profession [1, 15, 16, 17]. Professional insertion constitutes a transition period between initial training and continuous professional development, with its duration varying according to different insertion contexts [18, 19] and the time necessary for teachers to adapt to their new roles. A professional insertion program typically integrates various mechanisms, including mentoring [20, 21, 17], collective support groups, remote support networks, training sessions, and welcoming measures [22], as well as the use of portfolios, videos, and demonstration classes [23, 24]. These elements, when effectively combined, contribute to the retention of novice teachers [1, 11, 25].

The issue of professional insertion is a relatively recent concern in the educational field, and the programs implemented in educational institutions are varied and novel, so their effectiveness has not yet been fully demonstrated [25].

To provide effective support to novice teachers during their professional induction process, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences in this process. In this context, the present research focuses on the professional induction experience of secondary education teachers, using the activity system theoretical framework, a concept from the third generation of activity theory according to [21]. This theoretical framework, which has been little explored in research on teacher professional induction, pays special attention to the social organization in which teachers integrate within the practice environment. Therefore, the study aims to answer the following question: How is the activity system characterized in which the novice teacher operates, from their initial training to their inclusion in the MINEDU teaching staff register?

Fundamentals of Activity Theory

Activity Theory originates from the studies of Lev Vygotsky (1934/1985), who proposed the cultural-historical approach as an alternative to behaviorist theory, particularly in response to the research of Ivan Pavlov (Vygotsky, 1930/2003). Vygotsky focused primarily on the concept of mediation, which constitutes the core of Activity Theory [21]. Over time, this theory underwent significant evolution through the contributions of Leontiev, who expanded the unit of analysis in mediated activity from an exclusive focus on the individual to also include the collective and its communication modalities [21].

The Third Generation of Activity Theory

The works of Vygotsky and Leontiev are designated as the first and second generations of activity theory, respectively. [21] continued their work and developed the third generation of this theory. While Vygotsky introduced the mediation of tools between the individual and their environment in activity theory, Leontiev incorporated rules and the division of labor as mediators of collective activity. [21] integrated these concepts within the activity system.

The third generation of Activity Theory is characterized by the study of activity systems and the historical and cultural contexts in which they are embedded. These systems evolve over time and can only be understood from their history. Each system presents a subject, which can be an individual or a group of individuals, involved in an activity that has a specific objective guiding the subject's actions. This objective is conceptualized as the object, which should be understood in terms of a goal.

Figure 1 shows the activity system and its different components, which include the subject, the tool, the rules, the division of labor, the community, and the object. Table I provides a detailed description of each of these components.

Figure 1(a). Model of Activity System according to Engeström

The Engeström Model

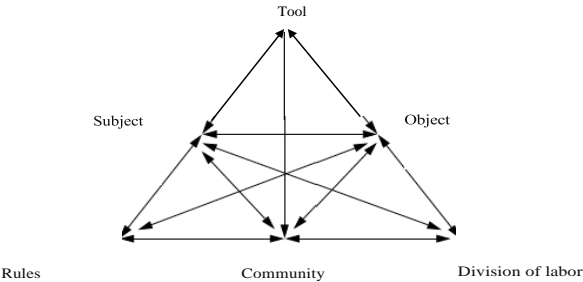


Figure 1(a). Representation of Engeström's activity system model, illustrating the interaction between key components: subject, object, rules, community, and division of labor. This model is essential for understanding the structural and functional dynamics within an organizational or educational context. Adapted from [26].

Table 1. Definitions of the Poles in Engeström's Activity System

Poles of the activity triangle	Definition of pole
Subject	Individual or group of individuals engaged in an activity that gives it meaning.
Tools	Material or conceptual artifact that allows the subject to achieve their goals.
Rules	Norms and habits that regulate actions and operations in the activity system.
Division of labor	Division of labor, distribution of roles and tasks with the aim of achieving the desired transformation.
Community	Individual or group of individuals, except for the subject, closely or remotely involved in the activity.
Object (Desired transformation of the environment)	Principal component underlying the activity and providing it with direction. Motive invoked by the subject to emancipate themselves from a need to which the activity responds.

Table 1. This table summarizes the definitions of the main components of Engeström's Activity System, providing a detailed description of each pole, including its function and relevance within

the theoretical framework of activity. Each definition helps understand how each component contributes to the functioning and dynamics of the activity system. Data extracted and adapted from [27].

Principles of Activity Theory

[21] develops Activity Theory based on five principles. The first principle establishes that the activity system, in relation to other activity systems, constitutes the primary unit of analysis. Each activity system must interact with at least one other system. Individual or group actions oriented towards a goal are relatively independent but can only be adequately interpreted and understood through interactions between activity systems.

The second principle states that the activity system should reflect multiple viewpoints, traditions, and diverse interests. Division of labor within an activity generates these diverse perspectives among participants. The activity system comprises different layers that are distinctively defined by their history, rules, artifacts (tools and signs), and traditions. Interaction between activity systems multiplies the plurality of voices.

The third principle emphasizes the importance of historicity. Activity systems evolve over time: their problems and potential can only be understood through their history. The historical character of activity should be studied at both local and global levels.

The fourth principle recognizes the central role played by contradictions as sources of change and development. Contradictions are tensions historically accumulated within and between activity systems. Although contradictions generate disturbances, they can also lead to innovations, as indicated in the fifth principle.

The fifth and final principle of Activity Theory proposes the possibility of transformations within activity systems. When contradictions become too intense, participants may question them and deviate from established norms. It is through the fifth principle that innovation becomes possible.

Activity System: A Framework for Interpretation

If the purpose of the third generation of Activity Theory is practice change and innovation, this research does not focus on that objective. Instead, Activity Theory serves as an interpretative framework for documenting teachers' professional insertion experiences.

2. Methods and Methodology:

The data collection method

The present study is framed within a qualitative approach. It was conducted using the case study method [28], which allowed for a better understanding of the professional insertion experience of secondary school teachers. The target population included secondary education teachers who have been on the priority list for less than two years in a school management unit and who have studied at the university. Three female teachers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted an average of one and a half hours.

During the interviews, two main topics were addressed: the experience during initial training and the experience during professional insertion. Five questions related to initial training and twenty questions related to professional insertion were posed. These questions focused particularly on the transition from initial training to professional insertion, early work experiences, adherence to the priority list, and professional insertion programs. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. All participants were recruited via email.

The data analysis procedure

The interviews conducted with the participants were fully transcribed and analyzed using the content analysis method. A mixed model approach was chosen, which involves using pre-existing categories while also allowing for the emergence of new categories. The different poles of the activity system—excluding the object (subject, tools, rules, division of labor, and community)—formed the pre-existing categories. The object pole was not specifically segmented into units of meaning like the other poles because its meaning is derived from the participants' overall discourse. Therefore, it is accessible through the other poles of the activity system and their interrelationships. The new categories helped refine the pre-established categories; thus, they constitute subcategories of the various poles. This data analysis procedure led to the development of the activity system for each participant.

The activity system of teachers in professional insertion

Based on the scientific literature on the professional insertion of teachers, a theoretical activity system for teachers in professional insertion is proposed. In the subject pole, the individual is identified as the teacher in the process of insertion. The tools pole includes various professional insertion devices [29, 25, 24]. As for the rules pole, it encompasses the norms of coexistence and the implicit expectations specific to each teacher and school [30], as well as regulations and rights according to the teacher's employment status, whether as a substitute or subject teacher. Added to this are the unfamiliarity with pedagogical materials and work environments [30], the challenging adherence to priority lists, and complex working conditions [11], including the assignment of gradual replacements and low proportion contracts. The most demanding and complex tasks for teachers in professional insertion, involving different classes, grades, and schools, characterize the division of labor pole in the activity system [11]. In the community pole, university professors, practice supervisors, other teachers, principals, educational advisors, education assistants, students, parents, the Ministry of Education (MINEDU), etc., are included.

Finally, the object of the activity of teachers in professional insertion is identified as the perseverance in the teaching profession. Achieving this object will be through the implementation of measures that facilitate professional insertion. These measures represent the expected outcome in the activity system. Figure 2 illustrates this system.

Figure 2 (a). Poles in the Activity System for Teacher Professional Insertion

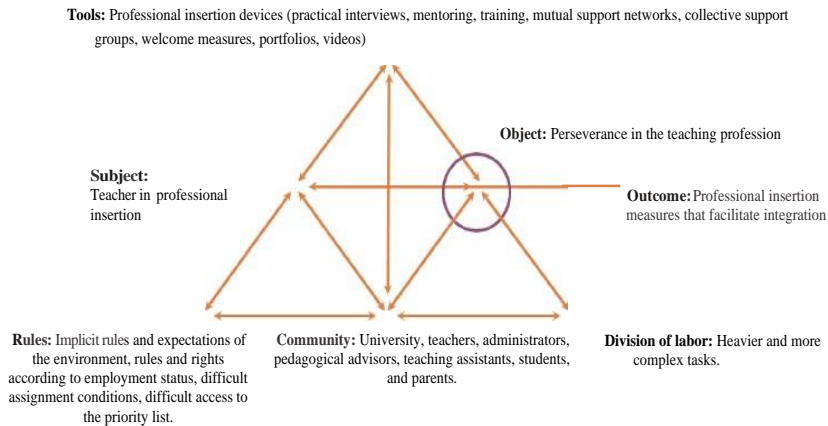


Figure 2 (a). Diagram showing the identification of poles in the teacher activity system during professional insertion, using a theoretical approach of activity systems. This model illustrates the key interactions between components: Subject, Object, Rules, Community, and Division of Labor, focusing on how each element contributes to the process of teachers' professional insertion. Adapted from [26].

3. Results

3.1 Participant 1

The first participant had dreamed of becoming a teacher since childhood. Even in elementary school, she played "teaching" using materials she collected from her teachers, defining her in the subject pole.

In terms of tools, the participant considers that the teaching received during her initial training is not very transferable to the job market: "I found it extremely theoretical and not easy at all. The courses didn't seem realistic to me." However, she positively valued the preparatory seminar for job interviews and the preparation of a substitute kit as relevant tools for her professional insertion. However, she regretted not being able to access the interview simulation service offered by her university due to its unavailability before her interview at the educational management unit. Mentoring was the tool she valued the most, as she had access to an available mentor whose work experience was relevant in supporting her tasks.

Regarding rules, the participant shows a particular sensitivity to compliance with them, especially those governing waiting and priority lists, which causes her a lot of stress in her professional insertion process. She strives to comply with the rules to the letter and is concerned about arbitrary decisions in their absence. "There was a week when I couldn't sleep or eat. I was

really stressed," the teacher comments, worried that deadlines for assessing her competencies would not be respected by the school administration.

In terms of division of labor, her contracts require her to collaborate with several teachers, posing challenges in organizing work and class management. "You try not to miss as much as possible. Even if you are on cyclical days, it's okay to introduce yourself to the students saying 'I am Mrs. so-and-so; but eventually they always try something,'" the teacher mentions. She particularly secured her job thanks to the teachers who supervised her during her practice. Her professional decisions consider various criteria, such as knowledge of the workplace and its proximity. Finally, regarding the community, the participant believes she maintains good relationships with her colleagues and superiors. Figure 3 presents the activity system of participant 1.

Figure 3 (a). Activity System of Participant 1 in the Professional Insertion Process

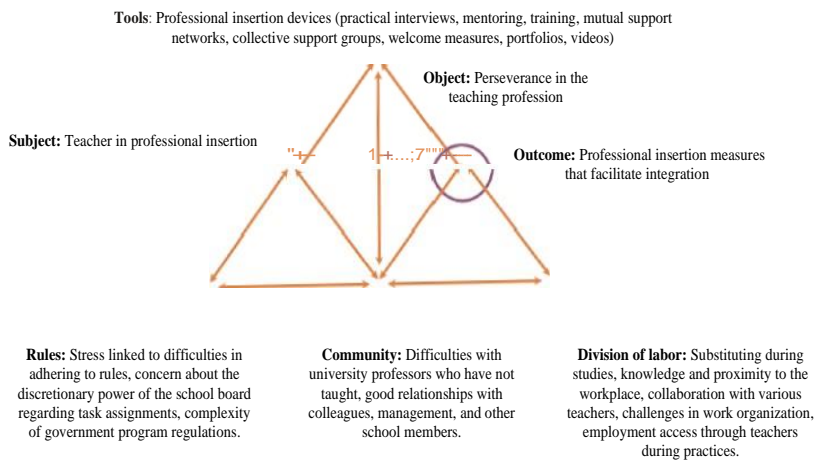


Figure 3 (a). This diagram represents the activity system for Participant 1 during their professional insertion process, using the theoretical model of Engeström adapted according to [26]. It illustrates the interactions between key components such as subject, object, rules, division of labor, and community, highlighting their mutual influence in the participant's specific professional environment. Adjustments in the model reflect specific data and observations from the current research, providing a visual perspective on the complexity of the insertion process.

3.2 Participant 2

The second participant is a woman who chose the teaching profession due to her affinity for adolescents and her desire to work with this age group. In the subject pole of the activity system, she presents herself as a teacher who has experienced a stressful and challenging professional insertion. She has endured episodes of fatigue and discouragement throughout her career. During an indefinite replacement in a first-year high school class, the teacher was exhausted: "I was so discouraged, just when the educational assistant spoke to me and abruptly dismissed me. I was

already overwhelmed by what was happening with my students, and the only person I talked to was the educational assistant at that moment. I couldn't see a way out."

Regarding tools, practical courses and job interview simulations were valued by the participant. During her professional insertion, she appreciated having a mentor, although informal. Despite showing interest in various training opportunities, she claims to lack time to dedicate to them. Additionally, she would like to benefit more from formative feedback from school administrations, a tool that she believes would help her become a better teacher.

As for rules, they have had a significant impact on her professional insertion experience. On two occasions, strict application of the rules by the educational management unit proved detrimental. This rigidity made it difficult for her to access the priority list. When she finally managed to enter the priority list, she faced a new rule: she needed to qualify for the secondary school priority list while currently in primary school. Thanks to a management that applied standard practices less strictly, she was able to gain access.

Regarding division of labor, the teacher obtained employment primarily through teachers and school principals she met during her internships. After some challenging experiences, she decided to be more selective in her substitute choices, even if it meant working less: "Since then, I decided to choose and be more selective about where I went. I worked less, but I didn't mind. I felt better." She describes teaching tasks as follows: "There is no one in life who, in the first six years of work, constantly changes colleagues, levels, and groups they interact with. Someone who always has the most difficult groups and tasks at the beginning."

Finally, she considers her relationships with the community to have been occasionally pleasant and at other times unpleasant. However, according to the teacher, her generally good relationships have helped her professionally integrate. Figure 4 presents the activity system of participant 2.

Figure 4 (a). Activity System of Participant 2 in the Professional Insertion Process

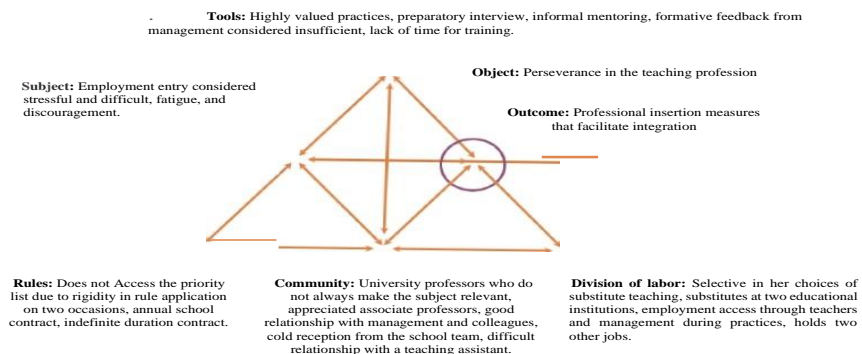


Figure 4 (a). This diagram represents the activity system of Participant 2, adapting Engeström's model as per [26] to reflect specific challenges and progress in her professional insertion process. It highlights the interaction among key elements such as subject, tools, rules, community, and division of labor, emphasizing how perseverance, fatigue, and difficulties intertwine to influence the professional insertion experience. This systemic approach provides a detailed visual understanding of the participant's particular dynamics in her workplace context.

3.3 Participant 3

The third participant has always aspired to become a teacher, but throughout her career she has questioned, and continues to do so, whether she should persevere in the profession. In the medium term, she considers leaving teaching; however, she plans to continue working in the educational field: "There have been times when I've come home crying and said to myself, 'I'm going to leave this, I'm going to do something different with my life. Maybe I'll lean towards psychology. Find something less demanding like youth educational services, ministry, etc.'" This brief profile of the teacher constitutes the subject pole of the activity system.

Regarding tools, dissatisfied with the available professional insertion tools, the participant took charge of her own insertion by equipping herself with tools to facilitate this process. She has started, among other things, specialized higher studies and has participated in various training sessions. She describes her initial training as follows: "It's too theory-focused. It seems that most of our professors, 90% of them, have never taught in secondary school, which creates a mismatch between what we learn at university and what we face in practice. We feel really left to our own devices."

As for the rules, those related to priority lists seem confusing to the participant, a confusion actually stemming from the lack of clear rules for task assignment. This aspect is regulated exclusively by the local collective agreement regarding the priority list.

Concerning division of labor, substitute teaching was a stressful period in this young graduate's life. Working in a familiar environment has become a means to mitigate this stress. This factor has become so important to the teacher that it now primarily influences her professional decisions. Throughout her career, she has always opted for contracts at the same school, except at the beginning of her career when she sought to enter the priority list. The participant also describes the workload assigned to novice teachers, both from her personal experience and that of her colleagues.

With respect to the community, although her colleagues supported her during critical moments of her insertion, the school board did the opposite by not facilitating, according to her, her professional insertion: "Fortunately, I had wonderful colleagues who helped me a lot. If it weren't for them, I might not even be teaching right now." Figure 5 presents the activity system of the participant.

Figure 5 (a). Activity System of Participant 3 in the Professional Insertion Process

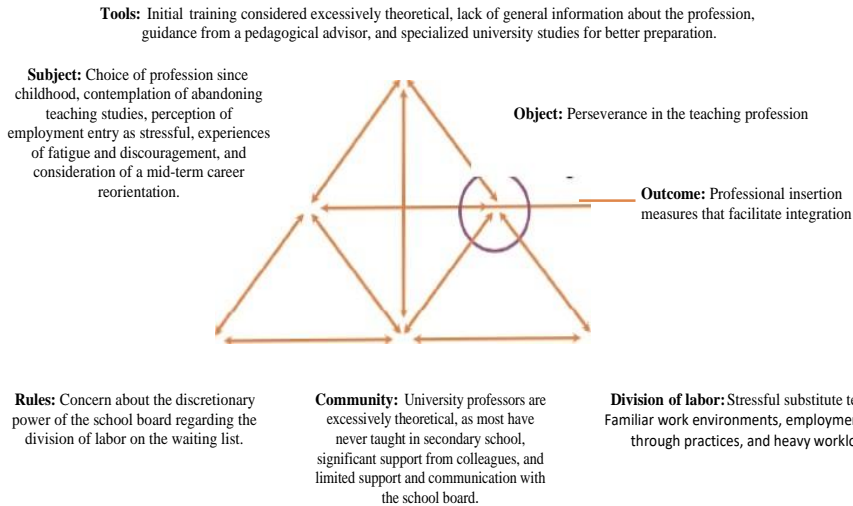


Figure 5 (a). This diagram represents the activity system of Participant 3 during her professional insertion process, adapting Engeström's model according to [26]. It highlights how fatigue and teacher perseverance significantly influence her professional development. Through the interaction of elements such as subject, tools, rules, community, and division of labor, the diagram illustrates the complex dynamics faced by the participant in her work environment. This visual representation helps to understand how the various components of the activity system interact and affect professional insertion.

3.4. Points of Convergence

The experience of each participant is certainly different, but several similarities can be identified throughout their trajectories. All three participants had no other career plan besides teaching and enrolled in a single program at one university.

During their university journey, they enjoyed their internships but not so much their professors, who, according to two participants, had little practical experience, resulting in training that was too disconnected from practice.

Upon entering the job market, all three participants began with at least a year of occasional substitute teaching. These initial steps in the profession came with their share of challenges: "You always arrive at new schools. There, you're really left to fend for yourself and you don't know the people you're going to work with. It's not safe." (Participant 2).

Having reached the waiting list, the participants then aimed to move up to the priority list. Participants 1 and 3 took just over two years to access the secondary school priority list, while

Participant 2 had to wait one more year to access it and another to reach the secondary school priority list.

All three participants emphasize the importance of knowing and liking the school where they work, reflected in their decision to work only in certain schools. In fact, this is the main criterion for Participants 2 and 3 regarding their professional choices.

The importance of integrating into a community is thus highlighted. However, to access the priority list, teachers must go through a school that was previously unknown to them. Achieving the priority list seems even more important than knowing the work environment. Adhering to the priority list is, in fact, for all participants, a guarantee of job security. Participant 3 expresses it in these terms: "Once you get there, it's like being wrapped in cotton, in the sense that you feel total security in your position."

Finally, after enrolling in the priority list, all three participants chose to return to the same environment, the one they appreciate and know well; their respective school from the internship stage.

4. Discussion

In light of the results, the limited access of the participants to professional insertion devices is evident (tools pole). The rules that classify teachers according to their employment status (rules pole) will influence this access. "I didn't have guaranteed access to training. I had to do it in my personal time, or if it coincided with class hours, I had to find a way to make up for my time," explains Participant 3, who had the status of a course-based teacher. Although novice teachers often occupy roles as occasional substitutes and course-based teachers—states that all three participants reached during their professional insertion—professional insertion programs are not always available to teachers in occasional substitution or short-term contracts [31].

The lack of time (division of labor pole), mentioned by Participant 2 for engaging in a professional insertion program, could also limit access to these devices [32].

It appears that the professional insertion of the participants was mainly facilitated by their colleagues (community pole). Participant 1 even noted that she didn't feel the need to engage in the professional insertion program because she "always had the strong support of her colleagues."

Regarding the object of the activity, perseverance in the profession, Participant 3 tends to distance herself from it. In fact, she is seriously considering leaving the teaching profession: "I am reflecting on the possibility of doing something different. [...] I think in five years, I may not necessarily be in a classroom." However, Participant 3's intention to leave the profession does not automatically imply resignation. Various events, both professional and personal, could ultimately lead her to decide to persevere in the profession.

The main strength of this research lies in its theoretical framework, which provides a systemic perspective on the issues addressed. Activity theory emphasizes the social context of professional insertion, aligning with the idea that the attrition from the teaching profession is explained by factors external to the individual, such as those related to teaching tasks and the social

environment [11]. In other words, the activity system not only considers the teacher in the process of professional insertion but also the entire community that facilitates the teacher's integration into the professional environment.

Methodologically, this research has certain limitations. The data collection through interviews could have influenced their validity. Participants, interacting with the researcher during the interview, may have sought to meet the researcher's expectations, responding to social desirability phenomena [33].

Regarding the data analysis procedure, content analysis, as noted by Henry and Moscovici (1968), provides the researcher with considerable interpretative capacity. To counteract this subjectivity, data triangulation has been employed with study participants and other researchers. This triangulation has been enriched by including a second coder in the content analysis.

5. Conclusion

This research has allowed for an analysis of teachers' experiences during the transition from initial training to the labor market, using a systemic approach to the problem. Activity theory, which has been underutilized in studying the professional insertion of teachers, makes a significant contribution to understanding this issue. It focuses on the social context in which teacher professional insertion is organized, rather than solely on the individual teacher: activity is seen as collectively shared rather than individual. The relevance of the activity system as an analytical framework in this study is evident in the rich interaction among the elements of the teacher's activity system during professional insertion. Indeed, rules, division of labor, and community influence access to professional development opportunities.

Given that the results reflect numerous organizational challenges experienced by teachers in professional insertion, especially regarding access to professional development opportunities, and that community support is highlighted as crucial for teachers' perseverance in the profession, a new research perspective to consider is the implementation of a mentoring program for novice teachers. This interventionist approach aims to transform practices in the environment and is based on the third generation of activity theory, involving active participation of various community members linked to teacher professional insertion. This method could enhance insertion conditions and ultimately strengthen perseverance in the profession, aligning efforts and shared goals among the stakeholders in this community.

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