

Interview¹

Maria Isabel da Cunha

Dialogues on Collaborative and Network Research: “the challenge of building a collective journey”

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The purpose of this interview was to dialogue with Prof. Dr. Maria Isabel da Cunha about Collaborative and Network Research: gains, challenges and perspectives in the field of research in education. The interview was conducted online by Prof. Dr. Solange Martins Oliveira Magalhães, in January 2021.

Brief Biography of Professor Cunha

Professor Maria Isabel da Cunha graduated in Social Sciences (1968) and in Pedagogy (1974) from the Catholic University of Pelotas. She holds a Master's Degree in Education from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (1979) and a Doctorate in Education from the State University of Campinas (1988). She was Pedagogical Supervisor at the Federal Technical School of Pelotas (1973-1988). She retired as a full professor from the College of Education, Federal University of Pelotas (1975-1999), where she was coordinator of the Graduate Education Program (1995-1997) and Dean of Undergraduate

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Studies (1989-1992). She did a Postdoctoral Internship at the Complutense University of Madrid (1998) and a Senior Internship at the University of Seville (CNPQ, 2013). She served for 17 years as a professor of the Graduate Education Program at the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos (2000-2017). She is part of the Rio Grande do Sul Network of Higher Education Researchers (RIES), with extensive participation in research and two FAPERGS / CNPq / PRONEX projects. She participated on the FAPERGS (1989-1992), CAPES (1999-2005) and CNPq (2009-2011) Education Committees and on the Commission that proposed SINAES (1992). She is currently a permanent professor of the Graduate Education Program at the Federal University of Pelotas. She has experience in the field of Education, with an emphasis on the following topics: higher education, teacher training, university pedagogy and university teaching. She coordinates the Research Group (CNPq), with twenty years of experience, and has published six books. She has a PQ1 Scholarship from CNPq.

To start the conversation

[...] a context is always linked to the person, to the infinite dialogue in which there is neither the first nor the last word... (BAKHTIN, 1977, p. 406-7).

Collaborative and Network research can be associated with the idea of cooperation as essential between researchers in the face of the collective work proposed in the construction of knowledge. In this sense, collaborative research has been shown to be a powerful experience in the field of research in education, from which we highlight some aspects:

- *First*, because it invests in a double inseparable responsibility - to create the best working conditions and expand the capacity to develop actions to provide researchers with support for professional development;

- *Second*, it supports possibilities of conjunction of researchers and groups of researchers, from a multi/inter/transdisciplinary perspective. For its maintenance it requires dialogic coexistence, a space for concrete, theoretical, reflective and interpretive action in knowledge production;
- *Third*, it expands the space for debate and the possibilities of learning and dealing with the diversity and complexity of educational phenomena;
- *Fourth*, because a collaborative project is likely to motivate researchers to deepen their studies, which helps to consolidate a conceptual-methodological and epistemological character within the scope of research in education. Motivating also privileges socialization, which involves adding an ethical posture, creativity, respect and affection, which favor self-knowledge, humanization and emancipation of those involved in the research;
- *Fifth*, but not the last nor the least, it can consolidate an important format to the work of professor-researchers - collective -, being a positive and striking aspect for the awakening of creativity, affection, exchanges, in addition to strengthening bonds in research, enabling aspirations towards praxis.

To continue the conversation:

Solange Magalhães:

First of all, professor, I want to thank you for your willingness and availability to collaborate with the Dossier Collaborative Network Research, from Ensino em Revista/UFU. I highlight your importance as a scholar and theorist, whether it be in the area of teacher education, as in university teaching, or in university pedagogy, among others, with an inspiring trajectory worthy of respect and admiration.

So, to start our dialogue, tell us a little about the shift from a quasi-individual research format to collaborative, network research. How did this idea come about and strengthen?

Maria Isabel:

I had been a researcher for many years, including working collectively, but there was no certainty about the intention of collaborative and network research. In 1998, we were a group of professor-researchers from different Higher Education Institutions in RS involved with the topic of Higher Education. This started discussions and the systematization of some actions, accepting the challenge of building a collective journey.

Initially, we met for an exchange of experiences around the discipline of Higher Education Methodology at the IES gaúchas (Gaúcho Higher Education Institutions), and we were more interested in qualifying teaching than in proposing a new format for group research.

The difficulties faced in the research led us to the idea of requesting funding from our FAPERGS (State Support Foundation) to create a study group. The Foundation replied that it did not contemplate this modality as it only supported research projects. So, we transformed the group's initial proposal into a Research Project that proposed mapping the institutional initiatives involved with university pedagogy in higher education institutions in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

We got the Foundation's support and this was the starting point that originated our Rio Grande do Sul Network of Higher Education Researchers - RIES.

Solange Magalhães:

When and how was the Rio Grande do Sul Network of Higher Education Researchers (RIES) consolidated?

Maria Isabel:

In 2000, the group met to study various educational themes, but after receiving the funding, we faced the need for systematic articulation of researchers, professors and students involved in the research, which set up the current Research Network - Southern Brazilian Higher Education (RIES).

Its consolidation required a collective construction intention that brought together different Higher Education Institutions into a comprehensive Research Project. Along this path, we sought to promote: study groups, debates, workshops and an education symposium, organized jointly. Thus, from meetings that initially sought innovations in the discipline Higher Education Methodology (aimed at university teaching and taught to professionals from areas other than pedagogy), we found a fertile field as an object of study in University Pedagogy, and we laid the foundations for what we now understand to be collaborative network research.

Solange Magalhães:

Please tell us a little more about the history and consolidation process of RIES:

Maria Isabel:

In order to succeed in meeting the requirements of the Public Edicts, four more consolidated Graduate Programs, with more experienced researchers, formed the "Central Nucleus" of RIES. At the time, PUCRS - (which still heads the Network today) with prof. Marília Morosini, UFRGS with professors Maria Estela Dal Pai Franco and Denise Leite, UFSM with professors Silvia Isaia and Doris Bolzan and I, Maria Isabel da Cunha, from UNISINOS.

Over time, other people belonging to the Programs of other Institutions were incorporated, as well as other Universities such as the University of Passo Fundo, the Federal University of Pelotas, the University

of Cruz Alta and La Salle University. Currently, since I left UNISINOS, UFPel composes what I called the central nucleus of RIES.

Since then, the Group has been consolidating and sending projects to funding agencies and, with this support, expanding its production and involving a significant number of students, especially masters, doctoral and postdoctoral students, contributing significantly to the advancement and dissemination of knowledge in the field of university pedagogy.

The group was strengthened from various experiences. As of 2001, the Group has already invested in maintaining its commitment to "the need for cooperation and social commitment of researchers in the construction of Higher Education and University Pedagogy as an area of knowledge and professional practice" (Information taken from the website: <https://www.pucrs.br/humanidades/ries/#historico>).

Subsequently, in 2005, RIES was chosen as the Center for Excellence in Science, Technology and Innovation of CNPq/FAPERGS, the only Nucleus in education, made up of the following universities: PUCRS, UFRGS, UFSM and UNISINOS.

Based on this recognition and support, RIES has been dedicating itself to the meta analysis of the area of higher education, having published in 2006, through INEP/MEC, the University Pedagogy Encyclopedia, vol. 2 Glossary.

In the context of the Center for Excellence in Science, Technology & Innovation in Education, RIES also held the following seminars:

- 1) UFRGS – II National Symposium on Higher Education and Professional Development – June 29 and 30, 2006. Porto Alegre/RS;
- 2) PUCRS – IV International Seminar on Higher Education, Learning in Higher Education – Teacher professional development and student development – October 9 to 11, 2006. Porto Alegre/RS;
- 3) UNISINOS – V National Seminar on University Pedagogy – Higher Education: challenges and perspectives of research groups in the academic context – from 14 to 16 May 2007. São Leopoldo / RS;

4) UNIFRA/UFSM – IV Symposium on Higher Education – Teacher Professional Development – I Forum of researchers in Higher Education. Santa Maria / RS.

In 2007, RIES was selected as an Education Observatory – “Quality Indicators for Brazilian Higher Education” by CAPES/INEP. The Project's objectives were: to configure and map the performance indicators of the Brazilian and international higher education system related to the quality of higher education; select and build indicators in the categories identified as denoting the quality of higher education in the country; analyze the quality of higher education from indicators built using the database provided by INEP/MEC with possible complementary bases; relate the higher education quality indicators built by RIES with what is included in the constitutive policies of Brazilian higher education. It was establishing international partnerships, consolidating the culture of joint production, and keeping the peculiarities of each segment that make up the Network.

We continue with Projects approved in the context of the FAPERGS/CNPq/PRONEX Edict that gave special impetus to the production of groups that socialize in the form of open seminars, books and the emphasis on the volumes of University Pedagogy Encyclopedia editions that have the new formats to be released immediately.

Solange Magalhães:

It's a remarkable story. What else could you highlight as positive aspects of your experience with collaborative and network research?

Maria Isabel:

I would add that the Network is, in the first place, a space for solidary learning, which is very necessary in academics. It breaks fierce competitiveness and favors the qualification of productions through multiple perspectives on the objects of knowledge.

It favors the reduction of hierarchies without losing the possibility of recognizing the contribution of each participant according to their expertise. It strengthens the understanding of the object of study in a broader way and in its greater complexity as it has multiple energies to focus on the field of study.

It teaches sharing and respecting the opinions of others. It exercises patience with difference and collective solidarity.

Solange Magalhães:

How is academic production in a network? Could you tell us about the processes, advances, and gains?

Maria Isabel:

I don't think there is a single answer to that question. A Network weaves its own culture that merges the participants' previous experiences and the conditions of the institutions that host the experience.

The wise words of the Spanish poet Machado fit well... *There is no path for a hiker... the path is made by hiking...*

It is clear that the accumulated experiences, as I have already highlighted pointing out some aspects of the RIES history, can inspire those who want to build Research Networks. However, each situation will require reading of the objective conditions that involve interests, participants, possibilities, goals and resilience. These are the conditions that guide the processes, the advances and the gains.

They also help to avoid difficulties and alleviate failure.

Solange Magalhães:

Regarding the relationships in the work of Network research, how are they constituted?

Maria Isabel:

In my opinion, the foundation of a Network is trust and transparency; sharing in decisions and legitimate recognition of leaders.

Solange Magalhães:

Could you tell us about other activities that permeate the work of network research, such as the need for Study Groups, theoretical and methodological debates?

Maria Isabel:

Study Groups can be the matrix of a Research Group, but they do not reach that condition. The research has its own characteristics and must respond to the settings. The Study Group is more flexible in its constitution, considering the mobility of students in a Graduate Program and the interest of the professors and the Research Lines to which they are affiliated. The Research Group is organized around a theme that encourages temporally defined projects with tasks and responsibilities assumed by the protagonists. It requires a commitment to cohesion and shared responsibility. The Research Group must have a common Project, although this may be broken down into sub-themes or sub-projects that are under the responsibility of sub-groups. But a unifying Project is needed.

A Network can and should bring together several Research Groups - as is our case at RIES. The Groups are linked to their Institutions, to their Programs, but they work in the Network Project without harm to other Projects that may wish to develop independently or with other Networks.

Solange Magalhães:

About collective publications, how does the network resolve the issue? Because there are many researchers who work effectively in research...

Maria Isabel:

Collective publications give body and visibility to the Network. They are what bring the result of the work produced to the public in an articulated way and make the Network become known. In this aspect, the development agencies themselves demand and encourage productions of this nature.

Publications rotate their authors, appearing at various events and other means of dissemination. But there is a commitment to collective authorship distributed among the multiple products that result from the great Network Project and the Sub-Projects of the Groups that comprise it.

Solange Magalhães:

What is the meaning of this work for you, your mentees and peers?

Maria Isabel:

It has been a great learning experience for me to participate in the construction of RIES and see this Network reach a level of maturity that even we had not anticipated at its inception. I did a lot of learning with the Network team and I believe that I helped my Research Group - including scientific initiation scholarship holders, master's, doctoral and post-doctoral students - to also participate in investigations, events and national and international articulations that were important in their training processes.

I learned to research collectively in such a way that I would no longer know how to conduct a solitary investigation. I understand that the Network and the Research Group is a place of training par excellence and that it was an important induction of the CAPES evaluation model for Brazilian graduate studies.

The culture of research in our Programs has changed a lot and has brought us closer together with public education networks and other institutions.

It helped the University open up more to the community, involving partnerships that understand that knowledge is produced when we share ideas, experiences, questions and expectations.

Solange Magalhães:

Moving towards the end of this interview, could you add something about collaborative and network research?

Maria Isabel:

It is important to emphasize that collaborative and network research requires maintaining a training process, with good collective and collaborative coexistence. This consolidates a space for socializing questions and experiences, in addition to influencing the collaborative-critical sense in carrying out research with greater safety and autonomy.

Therefore, with the establishment of a climate of respect and care, the feeling of belonging to the group is stimulated, which indicates openness to the other, as recommended by Freire (1998). Without trust between the participants and without trust in themselves, there would be no collaborative work in the Network.

Collaborative research is rooted in inclusive presuppositions and provokes the co-construction and awareness of subjects, which strengthens emancipatory and humanizing processes beyond research networks.

Our experience shows that networks are normally maintained when based on ethics, keeping together people with a diversity of skills and experience who add their efforts, and thus achieve better results than if they worked individually. Furthermore, research networks are one of the most favorable ways to establish a multi/inter/transdisciplinary space.

Solange Magalhães:

Finally, I'm sure this interview will inspire other researchers. Your trajectory leaves marks of an ethical and theoretically consolidated life, but it is neither greater nor surpasses the human being and the inspiring person that you are.

Although we are approaching a story that recounts her academic life, it is impossible not to mention the privilege of dialoguing and interacting with *Dear Professor Mabel*. A soft-spoken teacher with a loving, caring relationship, involved in the difficulties of each of the students and researchers.

I know that if this interview were an open letter, in which other students, professors and researchers (I include myself here) could send you words and affection, this interview would be a true declaration of love.

Thank you, professor!