



## THE PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE OF DEVELOPMENT AGENTS

### LIMEIRA/SP EDUCATIONAL

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#### Abstract

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In the Services sector, particularly in Education, individuals are not merely a means or the end goal of work but rather the raw material of this process. Consequently, human relationships are crucial for the implementation of work, a vital human activity. This study focuses on the interactive work of Educational Development Agents within the Supervision Division of the Municipal Education Department in Limeira/SP, Brazil. These professionals are responsible for monitoring and supporting those working in schools, ensuring compliance with legislative and practical aspects. The objective of this article was to map and systematize the motivations and professional challenges faced by educational development agents within the Limeira/SP Education Department. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in March 2023, divided into five axes. After transcribing and analyzing the interviews, concepts from Activity Ergonomics and Historical-Cultural Activity Theory were employed. Results were categorized into motivating factors (professional trajectory, work dynamics, impact of work) and professional challenges (legal and bureaucratic aspects, professional trajectory, hierarchy, COVID-19 pandemic, socio-political scenario). Verbal expressions highlighted aspects of the lower part of the activity triangle (rules, division of labor, and community), highlighting the collective and interactive nature of this work.

**Keywords:** activity system; activity ergonomics; municipal education; education department; work.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Contextualization

The municipality of Limeira was founded in 1826 and is located in the center-east of the state of São Paulo. Based on the 2022 demographic census, the estimated population is 305,169 inhabitants (IBGE, 2022). It is in 178th position in the ranking of Human Development Indexes in Brazil (PNUD, 2021), with a score of 0.775, being below the average for the state of São Paulo (0.783), but above the average for Brazil, in the same period ( 0.724)

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(IBGE, 2010). The city's main economic activities were coffee cultivation, which contributes to the urbanization of the region. After the 1920s, sugar cane and orange agriculture redesigned the regional agro-industrial scenario. Currently, the Limeira microregion stands out for its diversification of activities, having an industrial park, agricultural enterprises (Peres & Baeninger, 2012) and the majority of the population employed in the service sector.

Currently, Limeira City Hall is divided into 18 departments, one of which is the Municipal Department of Education, led by a secretary with extensive administrative and business management experience. The department is responsible for managing 82 school units, divided into five regions. The educational levels under the responsibility of the Municipal Secretariat are Early Childhood Education, through daycare centers and preschools, the initial grades of Elementary School (1st to 5th year) and Youth and Adult Education. According to the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law, in addition to the municipal public network, it is also the role of this secretariat to supervise the early childhood education network created and maintained by the private sector (Brasil, 1996). According to the city hall, the biggest current challenge facing the municipal education system refers to the deficit of places in daycare centers, therefore, daycare grant programs were developed in the municipality with the purpose of mitigating the problem (Prefeitura Municipal de Limeira, 2021) .

Numerically, this municipal education network is divided between: 28 Early Childhood Education Centers (CI), which currently have 6,292 children, aged 0 to 3; 5,942 students in preschools and 12,812 children enrolled in primary education, distributed across 7 Early Childhood Education and Elementary Education Centers (CEIEF), 14 Municipal Early Childhood Education Schools (EMEI) and 32 Municipal Early Childhood Education and Elementary Schools (EMEIEF); 01 Municipal School of Supplementary Education (EMES), which serves 123 young people and adults (Sallati, 2022). Below is a map of the municipal Education network, with its service coverage radius - 500 meters - in accordance with the municipality's Master Plan (articles 104 and 105):

The Education Department of Limeira/SP is organized as follows: I - Secretary's Office; II – Pedagogical Department (Teaching Division, Supervision Division, Training Division, Sector: Educational Social Service); III – Department of Planning and Administration; IV – School Support Department.

From this scenario, this study delved specifically into the work of the twelve Educational Development Agents (ADE), present within the Pedagogical Department and the

Supervision Division (as shown in figure 1), responsible for monitoring and supporting the municipal public education network and performance in the private children's network. The prerequisite for occupying this role is to have a degree in Pedagogy with a full degree or to have completed a postgraduate degree in Education, and also have at least five years in official public teaching, of which two of these must be in support positions or functions. pedagogical (coordination or direction), or at least eight years of official public teaching. In this way, these professionals enter this role through a public examination, sharing something in common: working in public teaching.



**Figure 1** . Hierarchical Structure of the Department of Education of Limeira/SP. Self elaboration.

## 1.2 Theoretical Framework

To understand the daily activities of ADE, the focus of the study, it is necessary to characterize the work in Brazilian Basic Education, which is made up of a wide diversity of actions, from disparities in management formats, such as the territory and environment in which this service is inserted. . And, despite the evolution of training courses for these professionals over many centuries, from the construction of the first Normal Schools in Brazil, to the dissemination of distance Pedagogy courses, much knowledge related to teaching practice continues to be constructed in the daily life as the pedagogical relationship is established with your class. Therefore, “classroom management is one of the most complex aspects of teaching work, as it is constituted by the relationship between the teacher and the children, mediated by norms and school knowledge” (Veríssimo et al., 2021).

The theory and practice of teaching work are complementary components, necessary for professional performance. “Therefore, the complexity of teaching work is also expressed in the impossibility of predicting and anticipating events in order to carry out the tasks foreseen in class planning” (Veríssimo et al., 2018, p. 136). In this way, the prescribed work (task) and real

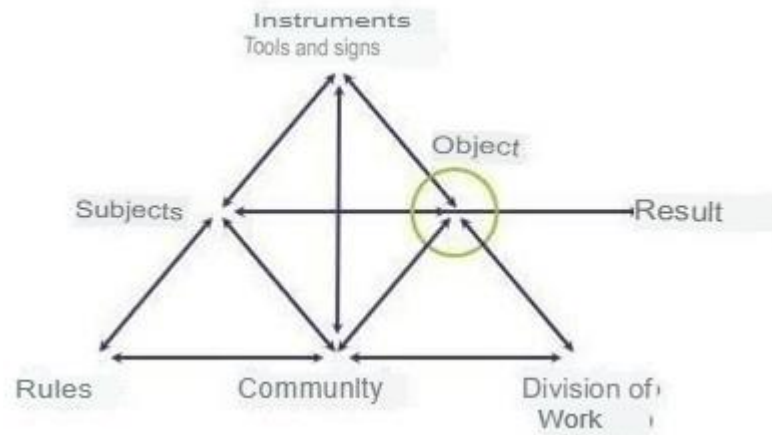


work (activity) (Guérin et al., 2001) become distant, as, with each entry into the classroom, the teacher will need to use all of her cognitive apparatus, tacit and explicit knowledge, to be able to deal with an unpredictable context.

Working in the educational sector is still commonly understood as an activity related to a life project, that is, those professionals who dedicate themselves to the subject must have a propensity for care and human zeal, associating their professional performance with a certain existential project (Leite & Souza, 2007). On the other hand, it is important to build a critical view of the romanticization of teaching, as work done purely out of love and care. This is precisely a social construction that ends up feminizing this work, understanding that economic activities aimed at care or that have relationships with the public of children and the elderly, must be directed at the public of women, in accordance with the structural characteristics of the division sex work. Hirata and Guimarães (2012) mention the emotional involvement in the work of *care professionals*, even though they are subject to unfavorable situations and social recognition.

To understand this phenomenon that is working, Engeström (2016) evolved Vygotski's thinking by structuring a representative scheme, called Activity System (figure 2). The objective of this construction is to visually demonstrate, in the figure of a triangle, the elements that surround human activity in certain spaces, so that their complexity can be understood and, in particular, the contradictions, conflicts and dilemmas that are faced when trying to achieve the object of that activity. In this way, human interaction with subjects and the environment around them evolved socio-historically, generating living systems. These interactions evolved through cultural mediation, and in this way, higher psychological functions such as memory, consciousness, perception, attention, speech, thought, will, formation of concepts and emotion (Souza & Andrada, 2013), were constituted, thus enabling the transition from individual to collective activities (Engeström, 2016).

With this, the first triangle constituted by Vygotsky took into account the interaction of the human being with the environment (tools and signs), searching for an object, that is, what is expected with that action. Such instruments refer to artifacts, which only become instruments of an activity, when the subject starts to use them to deal with the object (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2015). For example, a teaching plan is only in fact an instrument used by ADEs when it is used to obtain their objective of supervising municipal education.



**Figure 2 .** Activity System. Engeström, 2016.

After this first layer, the elements at the bottom of the triangle were added, from the moment that the human collective gained prominence, considering that the human being is a being that constitutes itself in society (Vygostki, 1991). From this, the spoken and unspoken prescriptions were categorized as rules, the social organizations of work were characterized as division of labor and the interaction between subject and other subjects was called community (figure 2).

From this perspective, this study aims to map and systematize the motivations and professional challenges of educational development agents within the Department of Education of Limeira/SP.

In this way, this research is justified by producing interdisciplinary knowledge, which provides the presentation of the challenges of and at work for professionals in a public policy management role that is still little debated in the literature. There is vast content described about teaching work in the contemporary context, however, little analysis is made of the contradictions, impediments and successful experiences present in the most strategic layers of management in the educational sector. The aim is to present data on the reality surrounding the work of these professionals who, on many occasions, are faced with conflicts arising from their previous history as teachers and the organizational and political needs present in the municipal educational management work.

## 2. METHODOLOGY



The present study used a semi-structured interview as a qualitative method, divided into five axes. The choice for this method was based on the opportunity to obtain, in a standardized and previously established way, information about feelings and opinions (Marconi & Lakatos, 2010) on certain topics related to work. The instrument had fifteen questions or specific points, subdivided as follows: I - Initial Moment; II - Characterization of the Work; III - Characterization of teaching work; IV - Analysis of contradictions and relationships regarding the teaching-learning activity; V - Closing.

The interviews took place during the month of March 2023 and were authorized by the Ethics and Research Committee of UNICAMP – Universidade Estadual de Campinas (CAAE: 47885821.0.0000.5404). The invitation to the study began with obtaining the telephone contact of an ADE - Educational Development Agent, responsible for supervising a certain school in which the researchers had previously maintained scientific contact. Then, a formal invitation was made by sending an email, which was later approved by the Secretary of Education of Limeira/SP.

Through preliminary conversations with the group's representative, twelve professionals were identified as working in this sector, which monitors and supports the functioning of all Basic Education in the city of Limeira/SP. The twelve professionals were invited to participate in the study, receiving the invitation through this representative, in a team meeting. Despite the hierarchical structure having twelve people, during the period during which the interviews were carried out, only three professionals were available for exchange due to competition with other activities reported by the ADE's themselves (work overload, internal demands, staff strike).

The interviews were recorded and carried out in a reserved room in the work space, during the work day. These were conducted by a single researcher. The analyzes presented here were based on this representation of the public and, like any qualitative study, present stories, experiences and memories of a portion of the population that, to a certain extent, can be generalized to characterize that scenario. After carrying out the interviews, the audios were transcribed and analyzed, using analytical concepts from Activity Ergonomics (Guérin et al., 2001; Abrahão et al., 2009; Clos, 2010), and Historical-Cultural Activity Theory (Vygotsky, 1991; Engeström, 2016; Virkkunen & Newnham, 2015).

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**



The position of ADE present within the Department of Education of Limeira/SP is filled through public competitions that take place sporadically. The latest hires were described in notices in 2012 and 2018, constituting a list of candidates who were recruited over the years. In his last competition, the salary was R\$5,618.90 for 40 hours a week. And, among the description of activities, participation in the elaboration, execution and reconstruction of public educational policies was present, proposing measures that ensure quality school education.

It should be noted that the responsibilities include the following tasks: interpreting guidelines to apply them to different realities; evaluate different measures and projects regarding operational aspects and achieving objectives; ensure access and flow of information regarding work in progress, at different levels of the education system; participate in the preparation of work plans for the Municipal Department of Education in which it operates, in order to coordinate the action of the different sectors to meet the core activity of the education system; organize your action plan to guide, monitor and advise school teams in the preparation and implementation of the pedagogical project; encourage and promote in-service training of school teams; carry out other related activities, determined by the immediate superior (Prefeitura Municipal de Limeira, 2018).

These attributions, however, make up what is called a task, that is, a set of conditions and prescriptions determined by the employer, which aims to establish a professional's way of functioning in relation to time, also creating standardization among professionals who work in functions similar. The conduct task is not the work itself. This is constituted from the notion of activity, which is operated in the dialectic between what is prescribed and the dimension of reality. In this way, the activity is dynamic and uncertain, according to human variability and work situations (Abrahão et al., 2009).

This movement is characterized as objectification and appropriation in which, respectively, subjects “objectify themselves in the products they build, transferring their physical and mental activity to objects (material or not)” (Meira, 2008, p.148), transforming the continues human culture and places its subjectivity in reality. At the same time, they appropriate the culture accumulated by the human race “in the course of social history that allows the acquisition of human qualities, capabilities and characteristics, and the continuous creation of new abilities and psychic functions” (Meira, 2008, p. 149). In this way, individuals are born as a “candidate for humanity”, but only through systemic movements of transforming the prescribed into reality do they learn to be human beings (Leontiev, 1978). As a result, the movement between appropriating reality and objectifying one's thoughts creates natural conflicts and discomforts in this confrontation.



The following stand out as general characteristics mapped during the interviews:

- Female audience: all professionals who worked in the sector were women, demonstrating the gender marking present in the work of the services sector linked to Education.
- Time in the role: there is a certain renewal in the team of professionals. While one professional was already retired as a teacher and remained in her role as ADE, the other professionals interviewed started their role just under six months ago.
- Entry into the service: all entered through a public competition, as provided for in legislation. However, there is a four-year gap between the competition and the vacancy (2018 to 2022).

During the interviews, a variety of reports were observed. In this way, aiming to systematize data collection, the interviewees' speeches (approximately 4 hours of recordings) were first selected, highlighting the information considered most relevant in the speech. Subsequently, these statements were segregated into two categories: satisfactory and challenging characteristics at work. Finally, the satisfactory and challenging contents were organized into analysis subcategories, seeking to understand the main themes that surrounded this work, as shown in tables 1 and 2.

Subcategories	Definition	Verbal manifestations of motivations
Professional trajectory	Positive aspects related to acting as an ADE.	<p>“Actually, I am a teacher by vocation, <u>I have always known</u> that my vocation was to be a teacher, I discovered teaching as a child. I was... I trained as a literacy teacher at first.”</p> <p>“Supervision is what I wanted, <u>I like</u> laws and rights. I started to like inclusion.”</p>
Work Dynamics	Reflections on environment, organization and division of labor.	<p>"Is there a request for a Secretariat? There is, but it's something calmer, you have a room, you can do it... you don't have as much interruption as at school, right".</p> <p>"In the Secretariat part here we end up having this time for analysis, for conversation, right?"</p> <p>“So, I'm in territory A, it's me, [name] and [name]. So, we divided the schools... so, we decide things together, we talk, there will be a visit and one goes with the other and everything... <u>there is a partnership</u>, but then I am responsible for three more individuals. ”</p>
Impact of	Desire to	“I chose public education because I... I choose equity, equality, I



Work	have an expanded social impact.	<p>think that we are all guaranteed in a democratic country like ours by a constitution, so I have been working for thirty-odd years so that everyone can have the the right to be at school, learn at school and choose the best paths that they think are for them. If it's being a teacher, if it's being a doctor, if it's being a gardener, but let it be an option, not a push, right?"</p> <p>"So, this discussion of Education needs to precede passion for liking people, acquired rights, a fair, egalitarian society for everyone, that's it."</p> <p>"I have something to do, a mission, human side, that I can improve that child's life. My greatest reward is teaching how to read."</p> <p>"When I taught at college, once I took some material from the Ministry of Education, including the lunch lady serving lunch in a favela in Rio de Janeiro and she gave an interview and she said: "for some I put a little more of beans because I know it's the only meal he'll have that day", is the <u>humanized view</u> of Education."</p>
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**Table 1 .** Motivations for working at the Department of Education. Self elaboration.

Subcategories	Definition	Verbal manifestations of challenges and difficulties
Legislation and Bureaucracies	Legal procedures surrounding work in a public policy and state body.	<p>"So, we need to have this more humanized look, which I think we are losing, right? I always want to achieve goals, right? Present results, but beyond the results I'm training people, right? So, yeah... that <u>was what I loved</u> about Education."</p> <p>"When I see someone say, for example, as I have heard in public education itself: "you don't have to talk about equity", it is a constitutional principle, so are we saying that we are going to disobey the constitution?"</p> <p>"So, this is also questionable and it's a bit ideological too, right? Politically, those who are in charge of public administrations want to rank and look for a shorter path that gives more visibility: "so, I had such an IDEB, so many schools reached such a grade", right? It's... it's constantly stated like that. But, apart from that, we have some public policies that "create" a process for this to happen, right?"</p> <p>"It's just that I'm a secretariat technician now, so, some judgments that [inaudible] as directors end up making: 'ah, but why is that? Why that?' I can't transmit this to my directors, right? I pass on information trying not to bring too much value judgment, even if I don't agree with something that was decided here, right?"</p>
Professional trajectory	Displeasure with work at previous or current points in your career.	<p>"I'm just starting out in supervision, I haven't been a director, nor have I been a coordinator. I really wanted to be a coordinator, but there was this competition and it worked out."</p> <p>"It's different working with children and adults, with children it's</p>



		<p>easier.”</p> <p>“There was no way to think [about the teaching position], it was turmoil, little time for reflection. When I was there [at school] I didn't see it like I see it today, there's no space to talk, you take students in the morning, recess, children, content, there's no time to think (...) I thought a lot about dropping out, it's not worth my time. mental health”.</p> <p>“But one of the things I miss most is that movement at school, as a child, you know? (...) I miss that contact like that, you know? That vucó-vucó”.</p>
Hierarchy	Hierarchical organization of activities and functions.	<p>“I have a truth that is mine and I always say the following: I will follow orders because I am hierarchically subordinate, but I will not stop saying the things I think and believe, right? So, many times I believe alone, I say it alone, sometimes there are several people who also believe, but they also don't want to expose themselves, they don't want to... right?”</p> <p>“Yes, for me it is really painful, ethically conflicting because beyond you it is part of the values, right? It's... your functional duties because, thus, at some point, legally, whoever supervises the public service, the Court of Auditors, the Public Prosecutor's Office can come and demand, of course, in the exercise of their functions: “you didn't know that you had to ensure that everyone was in school and everyone had this right”? “Yes, yes, but I followed orders from someone who didn't think that was a right.” I don't have... there's no defense for that, right? So, that also intrigues me, right? And these are the forces that we have to debate all the time, right?”</p> <p>“We are a team here, we don't talk to the pedagogical team; I had contact with the pedagogical team before [as a teacher]. Here I realize that they are always helping each other.”</p>
Covid-19 pandemic	Health crisis that culminated in emergency remote and hybrid teaching (2020 – 2022).	<p>“So, for the public authorities to say and attest and justify that it carried out educational activities during the pandemic is to justify that it did not sit idly by, but to say that this effectively achieved results, in my opinion, is utopian”.</p> <p>“We have this period that we need to recover because this child... distance education, in the age group we serve, is notoriously not efficient, right?”</p> <p>“And, if the Constitution says that Education is for everyone, it is for those who live in a house that has a study room with a computer and Wi-Fi, it is for those who live with eight people in two rooms.”</p>
Political-social scenario	Political changes that interfere with work.	<p>“It is for those who do not have a family with the conception of father/mother/children, it is for those who are human beings (...). This is something that worries me a lot too, right [diversity and prejudices]? It's a challenge, right? Bring to the public school debate these various student configurations that we have and who is responsible for them because we work with a public that needs to have someone responsible”.</p>

		<p>“It's a bit complicated because, sometimes,... sometimes they ask, they ask me like this: “what is the purpose of us being here? Isn't it for children to learn, for students to learn”? Yes, right? So that everyone is successful, but sometimes it takes [inaudible] patience. "Oh my God! Why is that”, right? So, there's this look that's a little bit, sometimes, more political, right? And that part is boring.”</p>
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**Table 2 .** Thematic characterization of challenges and difficulties of working in the Department of Education. Self elaboration.

It is possible to extract from the interviews that the work at the Department of Education has some singularities. This function, despite hierarchically exercising a position of direction for school units, is also subject to a current policy that, at certain times, can clash with existing laws, generating different levels of contradictions in the work space. As much as these professionals understand the responsibility that exists in their work, their power to act (Clot, 2010) becomes limited when they need to meet the wishes of the hierarchical structure.

Impediments can also be considered challenges, especially those related to the covid-19 pandemic. In a productive sector in which “people are not a means or purpose of work, but the “raw material” of the interactive work process” (Tardif & Lessard, 2012), the required body-to-body proximity between ADE's and all The municipality's education network, through the role of school directors, was severely impacted. This sanitary impediment to physical meetings also prevented the fulfillment of one of its main tasks: ensuring teaching and learning in an equitable manner.

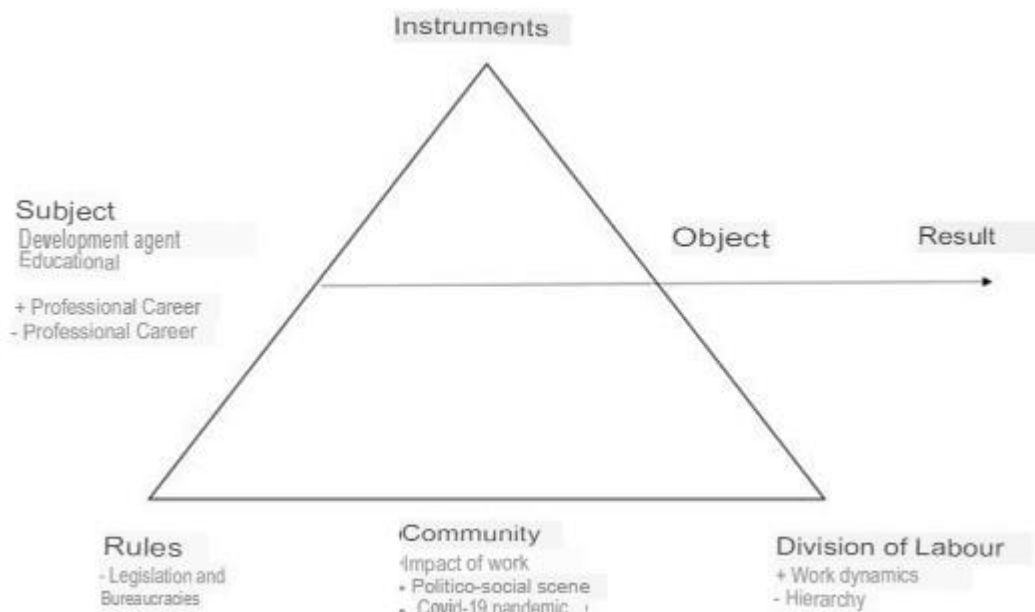
Furthermore, as one of the requirements of the role of a Development Agent was to have worked as a teacher, that is, in a classroom, understanding the work challenges of a school became closer. This sometimes generates a feeling of internal discomfort, given the role of mediators between governments and legislation *versus* school reality. In their reports, it is possible to perceive the longing for this routine, at the same time that they recognize their current position as a space of privilege.

There is also a need for great resilience when acting in this role, precisely because you need to demand and fulfill the role of legislator, at the same time as you feel in your body the contemporary challenges of the educational service. We can recognize this desire in the term street-level bureaucrats, who are those professionals directly responsible for delivering public policies to citizens (Lipsky, 2010). Although the agents do not deal directly with families and children, they have occasionally been in this position and are now responsible for regulating



and directing the best formats and possibilities for the team at each school to put this public policy into practice.

By structuring the categories of analysis within the Activity System, the motivators and challenges were implicitly linked to certain elements of the triangle. For example, in the Division of Labor the form of organization and division of tasks between ADE's was valued, however, the hierarchical organization was brought as a complicating factor in work (presented as positive and negative in the image below), as shown in figure 3. Furthermore, the verbalizations of the interviews were concentrated in the lower part of the triangle, where the main elements of interpersonal relationships are present. Thus strengthening what the literature already presents about work in the service sector.



**Figure 3** . Activity System and Subcategories. Own elaboration, based on Engeström, 2016.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

When trying to map and systematize the motivations and professional challenges of Educational Development Agents within the Department of Education of Limeira/SP, three categories of analysis were found as motivators (professional trajectory, work dynamics, impact of work) and five challenging subcategories, (legal and bureaucratic aspects, professional trajectory, hierarchy, covid-19 pandemic, political-social scenario). Many of these challenges could only be understood when we know the history of these women's professional careers.

The research presented a brief analysis of the professionals' speeches, therefore, the assessments concentrated their efforts on certain statements, delimiting one of the limits of this study. For possible future possibilities, analysis methods can be implemented to deepen scientific knowledge under the contradictions present in the Teaching Activity System, considering that several difficulties appear in the discourse of educational agents.

Finally, this study, despite contributing to the interdisciplinary construction between Activity Ergonomics and Historical-Cultural Activity Theory, also presents weaknesses due to the number of interviewees and the number of professionals new to their role (two of the three participants). However, the main objective of mapping and systematizing the motivations and professional challenges of educational development agents within the Department of Education of Limeira/SP during the first half of 2023 was covered.

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