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Pre-service teachers' conceptions about citizenship education: a case study at the University of Aveiro, Portugal

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Introduction

Never in the past have we witnessed changes in our society as deep, rapid and global as are happening today – changes such as the liberalisation of world markets, the increase in competition, the boom in scientific and technological knowledge, the progress in communication systems, the free circulation of people and broad flows of migration. (Carneiro, 1997; Cogan, 1998; Figueiredo, 1999; Nogueira e Silva, 2001). Despite its many benefits, the process known as globalisation also brings risks. These risks could be minimised by improving the educative level of citizens in order to enable them to face society's need for its members to participate in the resolution of problems affecting all individuals. In this context, Cogan, (1998) writes that the question of what should constitute education for citizenship in different nations has become critical if we are to prepare citizens to face the challenges of 21st century society with competence.

The school is a privileged space for the education of citizens, and teachers have an important role in this. It therefore seemed helpful to investigate pre-service teachers' conceptions of citizenship education, and the impact these conceptions might have on their curricular decision-making and practice, so that their future pupils will acquire the knowledge and the development of attitudes and skills that will promote civic participation in the resolution of society's problems. At the University of Aveiro an empirical study was undertaken with the following aims:

- to identify the conceptions of curriculum and citizenship education of pre-service teachers and their school supervisors;
- to analyse the teaching practices of pre-service teachers in order to understand how they put their citizenship education conceptions into practice; and
- to identify and to analyse the strategies used by the supervisors, which inform the teaching practices developed by the pre-service teachers.

A further aim of the study was to identify new issues of curriculum development regarding citizenship education, both at teacher training and at school levels. This will help us to understand how the school could provide a better education in order to enable citizens to face the challenges of a changing society.

Study context

The study was carried out within the context of teaching practice in the fourth year of the elementary teachers training degree at the University of Aveiro in Portugal. In the syllabus of the degree, teaching practice is carried out over one academic year, divided into two semesters. In order to develop the skills which will allow pre-service teachers to work on specific contents at different levels of complexity, and to work with children

at different stages of cognitive and affective development, the teaching practice is split between working with children in the first year of school (six years old) in one semester, and with children in the third or fourth year of elementary school (eight or nine years old) in the other. Following the principles of the 'ecological approach' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which suggest that the environment affects the quality of interactions between teachers and their pupils, pre-service teachers were placed in different schools in each semester, in groups of three or four elements.

Each group was thus placed in two different environments and was guided by two school supervisors (one each semester) with different personal and professional profiles: this enabled the research team to reflect on the possible influence of environment and of the school supervisor in the development of the pre-service teachers' conceptions and on the quality of their teaching.

The pre-service teachers' performance is a continuous process that starts with the shared implementation of the teaching activities between the elements of the group and concludes with each element taking individual responsibility for each teaching activity. This process is therefore organised in steps of increasing complexity. In each step the groups are supervised at two levels: at the school level and also at the University level through weekly meetings. The groups have

- one hour per week with the school supervisor to analyse their performance and to prepare their teaching lessons, and
- one hour per week with the University supervisor to develop their reflection skills.

The main goal is to develop reflective professionals capable of formulating for themselves the right ethical, social and personal answers to different problems (Sá-Chaves, 2002).

The sample

In the school year 2002-2003, there were 36 pre-service teachers involved in teacher training activities. Thirteen of them participated in this study and were organised into four training groups. Three groups had three elements (Group A, Group B and Group C) and one group had four elements (Group D).

Twelve school supervisors were involved in the supervision of teacher training activities, five of whom participated in this study. Two of them were acting as school supervisors for the first time and the other three for the second time. All but one of the five had more than twenty years of teaching experience.

Methodology

We followed a qualitative approach, with the characteristics of case studies. Different techniques and instruments were used to collect data, such as:

- a questionnaire designed for pre-service teachers and school supervisors to allow us to characterise the participants and to identify their curricular and citizenship education conceptions;
- interviews conducted with school supervisors at the end of each semester in order to understand the process and the development of each pre-service teacher in the curricular management of their practices of education for citizenship;
- individual reflective portfolios from the pre-service teachers;
- observations by the university supervisor of the teaching performance of the pre-service teachers; and
- notes taken at the supervisory meetings with the University supervisor (who was responsible for the study).

Other data sources were used, such as:

- published legislation within the scope of the curricular reorganisation process regarding elementary education and pre-service teachers' training;
- the National Curriculum for Elementary Education; and
- the syllabus of the teacher training degree of the University of Aveiro.

At the time of writing we are still at an early stage of data analysis, so this paper focuses only on the citizenship education conceptions of the pre-service teachers which emerged from three questions of the questionnaire (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Three questions of the questionnaire

<p>3.1 For you, what are the aims of citizenship education in elementary teaching?</p> <p>3.2 In your opinion, what should be valued in citizenship education?</p> <p>3.3 In your view, how should citizenship education be implemented in the elementary school?</p> <p>Give your answer by choosing the best sentence for you:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> It must be approached in a specific subject course with specific contents.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> It must be approached through different contents within the scope of different curricular subjects.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> It must be cross curricular approach which contemplates environment and the curricular contents and organization of the teaching activities.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other.</p> <p>3.3.1 - Justify your answer.</p>

The selection of questions was based on the literature dealing with this subject. The aim of the questionnaire was to identify in all participants their curricular and citizenship education conceptions. The processes of construction and validation of the questionnaire was made through consultation with

- curriculum and citizenship experts
- University teachers of the teacher training degree of the University of Aveiro
- school teachers at the elementary schools.

The questionnaire included both open and closed questions. This instrument was applied twice during the teaching practice: first in December 2002; and again in May 2003. The aim was to understand if there had been any changes in the pre-service teachers' conceptions. The questionnaire was answered in the presence of the University supervisor, who confirmed that all participants understood the aims and the instructions of the questionnaire.

Preliminary conclusions

Preliminary analysis of the data suggests that no significant changes were noticed in the pre-service teachers' conceptions regarding citizenship education. We believe that this is due to the great level of consistency of responses revealed by the first questionnaire, which followed the curricular guidelines for citizenship education. We think that the main reason for this lies in the syllabus of the degree, in which citizenship education is approached through a specific subject course, run in the second semester of the third year, named 'Ethics and Citizenship Education', as well as through others courses where the inherent dimensions of citizenship are also approached.

However, despite the high level of understanding showed by the participants, not all were at the same conceptual level. It is possible to infer that for one group citizenship education aims to develop social skills supported by values. They also recognised the importance of reflective processes and critical thinking as factors enabling their pupils to recognise their role in society. For another group this set of aims was enlarged; this group recognised that reflective processes and critical thinking are the basis of active and responsible processes of decision-making. This is indeed a global conception of citizenship education, covering the development of cognitive, ethical, affective, social and action skills (Audigier 2000, Figueiredo, 2002) supported by democratic values (Figueiredo, 2002), making use of the dimension of personal implication in the construction of the society as suggested by Praia (1999).

Regarding the implementation of citizenship education, the pre-service teachers highlighted the cross-curricular approach, which integrates the environment and the curricular organisation of teaching activities, as well as the experiences of the pupils both in and out of school. This type of approach suggests the idea that citizenship skills are developed *in situ* (Figueiredo, 2002). As stated by Freitas (1999, p 25), citizenship is 'learned by living it'. It also brings to mind the ecological perspective of human development supported by Bronfenbrenner (1979), in which he recognises the influence of several contexts (micro, meso and exosystem) in the formative process of the child. This perspective is also supported by the Recommendation of the European Council (Rec (2002) 12) concerning Education for Democratic Citizenship, which recognises that this area must contemplate not only formal educational activities, but also non-formal and informal ones.

These are preliminary considerations and new developments and analysis may bring about new conclusions.

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