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CiCe  
Institute for Policy Studies in Education  
London Metropolitan University  
166 – 220 Holloway Road  
London N7 8DB  
UK

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# **From the right to education to the development of a 21st century citizen: how do assessment practices of both childhood educators and parents contribute to the children's development of citizen competences since kindergarten?**

Rita Leal and Nilza Costa  
University of Aveiro (Portugal)

## **Abstract**

*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights reinforces, among other things, the role of humanity in the development of respect, acknowledgement and universal application of these rights and freedoms through teaching and education. Thus, and taking into consideration the complexity that characterizes our society today, it is necessary to change the role of learners. It is necessary to create more dynamic and autonomous ways of learning (Cachapuz, et al., 2004) given that the 21st century citizen starts to develop in kindergarten. We need to think about the different competences that should be developed in children in order to create a citizen with an active role in society. In our study, we have chosen to enhance the development of competences through learning assessment by educators and family.*

## **Introduction**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) stresses the acknowledgement of human beings and their fundamental freedoms. It also adds, throughout its preamble, that these human rights should be taken on board in the organization of all societies and that these, through education, should attempt

to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction (UDHR, 1948).

Thus, two fundamental ideas arise, one that is focused on the acknowledgement of the human rights as principles to consider when organizing societies and the other that emphasizes the role of education as the vehicle to promote them.

By identifying the importance of the human rights in the organization of societies, and being aware that they are today characterized by unpredictability, instability, ambiguity and complexity, citizens need to learn how to manage them. One way is through the development of competences at school level which allow them to act in a reflected, conscious, informed way regulated by values that support the dignity of the human being, present in their individual, personal, social, cultural and civil diversity (Cachapuz *et al*, 2004, p 25-26). This development of this type of competences should start as earlier as possible, namely in kindergarten as, in accordance to Proust (2005), the child should not be looked as the future citizen, as it is often referred, but rather as a citizen in the present (the child citizen) with the right to practise an active citizenship. However, it is necessary to think what kind of competences a child can and should developed on such educational level.

In Portugal this issue constitutes a challenge to childhood educators and researchers, namely in the Preschool Level (destined for children from the age of three to the age of enrolment in Basic Education), considering it the first phase of the *education throughout life* process. This challenge is due to (i) the curricular importance that the competences acquire within the Portuguese educational system and (ii) the fact the curricular orientations for this educational level does not specify the competences that children should develop, in opposite to the high relevance that competences play in the Basic Education level.

Considering that PE plays a fundamental role in the development of competences by children, as citizens capable of recognizing and accomplishing their rights and freedoms, the authors of this paper are developing, since 2007, a research project that aims to (a) define and validate a set of competences to be developed by children in PE (first phase), and (b) develop, implement and evaluate a training program with the childhood educators (second phase). Throughout this program we elect the assessment of competences by childhood educators, together with the family, as a way to promote its development. The chosen methodological design is a study case (Yin, 2003) in a PE Institution being our focus the

childhood educators, the children and their parents. A variety of methods and sources of data were used: interviews, natural observation of practises and documental analyses.

Thus, this article is divided in two main parts. In the first, we develop the relationship between ‘the right to education’ and the nature of competences to be developed by children in PE in the Portuguese context. This part ends with a list of the four main cross curricular competences which has emerge in our study. In the second part, we focus on the role of learning assessment, as a way to increase the development of such competences, and the contribution of the family in this process.

### **Cross-curricular competences in PE in Portugal**

Taking in to account the importance that is given in the UDHR that education should seek the full development of human personality and promote the understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, it makes sense to define cross-curricular competences that cross the different areas in the curriculum and are not specific to any in particular. In this way, and seeing the child citizen as a whole, we seek a global and balanced development enabling the child to fully integrate in society as an independent, free and considerate human being (ME, 1997).

Thus, one of the curricular principles that guided us in the definition of competences for PE that answer to what is intended from child citizen in the twenty-first century, is the cross-curricular principle. The cross-curricular competences characterized by a high level of generality and valid for the context diversity (such as the social life, family, health, education...), cross the various sectors of human existence without referring to scientific or school subjects (Perrenoud, 1996; Rey, 1996). It is clear that there are common mechanisms that allow the joining of competences to all social areas or to a great diversity of them, but it is not sufficient to match a competence to each of the characteristics of an area, but rather to construct a referential of competences based on the group of practices hereof described (Perrenoud, 1996). It is important, therefore, to think of competences and transversal knowledge in the sense that they cross all social areas and are not exclusive to only one of them.

Following the above ideas, and understanding curriculum as the learning outcomes, it has become evident the importance to reconstruct a curriculum in Portugal for the PE based on cross-curricular competences. In order to establish the competences to be developed we have undertaken the following steps:

- literature review, national and international, about competences in general and in PE in particular;
- documental analysis of national and international curricular documents;
- consultation of a panel of specialists and childhood educators professionally recognized by their colleagues, of previous list of competences proposal defined by the researchers.

At the end of these steps, it was possible to identify the four cross-curricular competences to be developed by children in PE:

- Competence 1 – During the resolution of the problems, the child mobilizes and activates knowledge, capacities and strategies that will allow them to learn to know.
- Competence 2 – Communicating and expressing their thoughts, feelings and/or learnings, the child associates multiple languages as a form of relation and representation with and of reality.
- Competence 3 – In situations of training and interaction, the child integrates knowledge and skills that allows them to manage their relation with the world (space, material, people), developing their identity, respecting others’ identity and overcoming conflicting situations.
- Competence 4 – Sharing learnings, experiences and knowledge, a child will develop work methodologies and their reflection capacity and critical thought.

### **The learning assessment together with family (parents)**

Throughout the investigation, and as previously stated, we elect the learning assessment of children by childhood educators, together with the family, as a way to promote the development of competences.

The assessment in PE, and according to the Portuguese educational policies, is an integral part of the teaching and learning process that allows adapting it to each child, to their needs, interests and evolution. (ME. 1997).

By documenting the child’s path in the development of competences, analysing the gathered information and interpreting the knowledge and thoughts of the children through the use of various tools, an authentic assessment in the PE is sought. The constant reflection that comes from the gathering of information

allows the childhood educators to rethink their pedagogical practices as facilitators or hindrances of learning and development of competences (Gaustad, 1996).

And in this process of gathering of information, the family is a singular source, since we cannot know the child deeply as an individual and unique human and follow his learnings in various contexts if we do not have them associated in the process of assessment of the development of competences (Gaustad, 1996; SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education, 1995).

Also in UDHR, in article 26, paragraph 3, is referred to the importance of the family in the education process, mentioning that the parents have the right to choose the type of education to give their children.

Regarding these ideas, we developed and implemented a training program that reflects on the development of assessment practices of the childhood educators together with the family, in our case the children's parents. We understand that communicating with the children's parents is vital for them to understand, support and be involved in the development of assessment practices. Their active participation, as a team member, in the assessment of competences of their learners promotes their learning and helps eliminate misunderstandings and some misleading interpretations that may occur about the education of their children. Including, in the assessment made by childhood educators, the knowledge that the parents have about their learners, we seek a more global, open and enriched vision of the assessment of competences, being it strengthened when different actors state their viewpoint.

### **Concluding remarks**

Seeing a child as a citizen of the twenty-first century and giving an important role to PE in the promotion of an active citizen, capable of recognizing and putting into practice their rights, rethinking education since kindergarten through the development of competences constitutes a challenge for the authors of this article. Even more so when there aren't specific curricular orientations in Portugal that set forth which competences should be developed at this level of education. In this way, an initial definition of competences was developed for which the cross-curricular principle was essential.

However, a definition of such competences is only one step. It is also fundamental to choose ways to promote their development. The way chosen by the authors is the assessment of these competences both by the childhood educators and the children's family, with high regard to this last one because it has been considered that the family is a privileged source of information about the child.

Given the fundamental role of the educator in this process, we developed a training program that aims to implement mechanisms and training strategies that promote professional development in relation to their assessment practices, being those developed together with the children's parents.

The authors of this article hope that the main phases of their research (a definition of competences in PE in Portugal and the development of a training program focusing on the assessment of these competences by childhood educators together with the family) is a contribution to the formation of today's child citizen, taking into account what is defined in national and international terms, particularly in the UDHR.

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**Legislation**

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)