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Walking the path towards citizenship education: three experiences in Portuguese schools

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Introduction

Between the 1986 Portuguese Education System Law that formally introduced a personal and social dimension in students' education and Law 6/2001 which restructured the compulsory school curriculum, several attempts were undertaken for the practical and formal development of this dimension in schools (Figueiredo & Silva, 2000). The 2001 Law reinforced the need and importance of citizenship education across curricular subjects as a necessary means of quality education and, amongst other measures and new areas of study, introduced civics education into the formal curriculum for Years 1-9. Although it is a non-disciplinary subject: there is compulsory attendance and qualitative final evaluation (Abrantes, 2002). Its nature is controversial as, for the first time, there is a field in teachers' work without a formal national curriculum and no teaching specialisation, and whose responsibility was allocated to the team of teachers for each class. It is the class teacher who, after this new legislation, also takes on the civics teaching. Although there is no formal programme, some publishers produced manuals and resources that are being used in different ways depending on the contexts.

From the legislators' perspective these new non-disciplinary areas were meant to provide space for students to engage in the learning of new topics such as Human Rights and the Environment and for teachers to have the opportunity to develop a new culture of collaboration, since the curricular decisions are to be taken by the team of teachers in each class (Fonseca, 2002).

This paper reports part of an empirical study aiming at analysing how the new reform is being implemented in schools, and how teachers are its challenges. Three class teachers were selected from different schools and agreed to participate in the study. Long semi-structured interviews were carried out with these teachers and an extensive range of documentation was collected in each school. Here, we give an account of the three case studies that were developed and which reflect some of the major problems associated with the actual processes taking place in schools:

Pedro

Pedro is an experienced 41-year old Physical Education teacher. He enjoys teaching and is enthusiastic about his mission, which he describes as 'being able to develop the children's motor capacities and thus influencing the cognitive and psychological development and well-being'.

Pedro is the Class Teacher of a problematic class group in the school. The Executive Team's decision to appoint him to that class was based on his previous experience with 'difficult' groups. The class is cared for by a group of teachers who do their best, with scarce resources, to help the pupils 'become citizens'. The social skills of the group are so low that improving these was set as the target for planning and organising the civics

education curriculum. All the teachers are a little drained and exhausted but are still willing to help.

Pedro is confident that, through physical education, these children may acquire some social skills. He believes that body expression is a good means to improve self-esteem. Usually, he tries to solve some problems in the gym, in group-work or, as he says 'interrupting class, sitting together and talking about the problem that requires urgent attention'. He is unable to differentiate his role as a civics teacher from that of Class Director as he spends most of the time in conflict resolution. Sometimes he introduces texts for discussion. He showed a text dealing with the difference between social and biological racism: 'Racism -- they know, they feel it everyday, however, they are unable to express themselves, debates take only 10, 15 minutes, the most. ... Some other classes may have interesting themes... but here, I accept whatever topic they choose to get them interested, and help them to express their own ideas but it is a daily struggle...'.

Since there is no formal curriculum, Pedro thinks that each teacher should include what they consider important for each class. In his case, he feels he has to deal with his pupils as persons first, and then as citizens. He sees himself more as an educator, helping the pupils develop group skills, than as a teacher pushing cognitive contents – 'the best school is sports school' he claims.

Pedro has never had any formal preparation for teaching Civics. He would like to have more experts visiting the school to talk about topics that might be of interest to the children, such as AIDS, the Iraq war, etc. At the school, most teachers gather useful pedagogical resources that may be used by everybody. However, Pedro does not apply many of these materials as the class is still at a very low level and he feels he has to go slowly in exploring small activities such as the gift exchange at Christmas.

At the end of each term, teachers have to evaluate the pupils in a three-grade qualitative scale. The schools did not receive any special instruction for this, so Pedro followed his own criteria based on how participative the children were. His expectations were limited: 'if I can make those heads think about any subject, for me, that is already important!'. He thinks that any teacher is able to teach civics education, even without any formal preparation. He believes that it is part of a teacher's skills to be able to develop in the pupils some degree of social competency but he admits that, ideologically, there may be some indoctrination from more extreme teachers.

Pedro accepts the way civics education has been reorganised by the Ministry of Education with no compulsory curriculum and open to local needs, so it may become more adaptable to each class group. Nevertheless, in his opinion it is hard work for the teachers, who have to seek out and prepare new materials but it seems a network is spreading through schools all over the country, and there is an enlarged exchange of ideas and resources, rather like a think tank being formed. This sense of sharing is happening inside his school too. Because most of the teachers are class directors, and thus have to teach civics, a new culture is being forged:

... people are very receptive, we get along very well, we tell our problems, we talk about and exchange our experiences, we have a small room where we meet and that was not happening last year.

Joana

Joana teaches English at a secondary school near Lisbon. She is 42 years old and has taught for 15 years. Her attitude towards teaching was summarised this way: 'I am in this job because, effectively, I chose to. I teach because I like it, I enjoy what I do and I like the students'. Joana emphasises the centrality of students in the educational process, seeming to be affectively and professionally involved.

In her school, there were no specific criteria except the scheduling arrangements for ensuring the role of the Class Teachers and, consequently, the responsibility for civics teaching. The articulation between the two tasks was felt to be dependent on the new policies.

Joana's initial insecurity, resulting from her lack of any formal development in this area and her lack of previous experience in citizenship education projects, was, slowly replaced by her acknowledgement that: 'this was the sort of thing that Class Directors have been doing all these years, that is, trying to help students in some aspects and making them more aware of some problems', adding value to the way teachers usually, develop their work. Because the time allocation of 45 minutes to Civics which coincides with class direction tasks, it is hard for teachers to separate the two: time is always short for paperwork so they 'have to steal' time from Civics.

For this teacher, citizenship education and civics deal with similar contents, 'they are almost the same thing'. She assumes that every teacher is paying attention to the opportunities that are open in each subject to introduce 'some values' and thus contributing to citizenship education 'across the curriculum' as stated in the Law: 'I do not have a civics programme, it is being done according to what is happening, their needs ...'. The emphasis is put on a response to current situations in the school or in the general social life. Thus, the students discussed the new national policies concerning student status following its publication, and organised several debates on different issues with themes related to human rights, racism and sexuality, among others. A major goal is the development of competencies in debating, such as respectful participation and tolerance towards different opinions. Joana values the opinion of her students and asks for their suggestions for topics to introduce into her planning.

According to Joana, most of the work in civics runs around 'dialogue and writing', with small-group work, video discussion and other activities that are taken out of one of the published manuals available. The student assessment is qualitative and descriptive of their attainment of personal and social competencies.

This teacher is overcoming her initial fears of not being able to meet the new demands. She is now more convinced that the necessary teacher profile depends more on personal and professional teaching skills than on a process of in-service development. The affective dimension is underlined in her reference to 'each one's sensibility or the need to like what one is doing'. For Joana, a teacher 'must feel good about her/himself ... be a thoughtful citizen who is able to deal with the other, who respects the other'.

Joana would like to have the opportunity to learn with more experienced colleagues, to exchange ideas that could be challenged and to have the possibility to ascertain the 'rightness or wrong doing' of her actions. Finally, her tentative evaluation of this

experience as civics teacher stresses the change in students' attitude. Joana believes she is contributing to 'the development of participative and critical citizens'.

Mariana

Mariana is 32 years old and has taught English for ten years. Her experience has taught her that 'school is not limited to the learning activity'. An intense period of work in a deprived social environment led her to understand that she had to make the curriculum significant for these children. Last year she took part in several pilot projects related to the implementation of the new curriculum areas: 'we worked hard (...) we elaborated several documents for the new subjects (...) we had many meeting with other schools, we read a lot, we researched, it was very enriching because it was something new (...)'. Mariana's involvement in working with others was crucial and gratifying. Now she is a Year 5 Class Teacher and simultaneously teaches Civics. She thinks that Civics teachers should be chosen 'according to a specific profile', but this is not the case in her school, where teachers are randomly allocated to a class. Mariana says that Civics is not her favourite teaching task because of the lack of students' lived experience in matters of citizenship, and their difficulties in seeing from other than their own perspectives. For her, citizenship is a long learning process requiring a daily experience of the democratic values – 'I think they like to express their ideas, but do not have the maturity to talk about certain issues ...'. She believes that the development of certain competencies, for example in debating or building empathy towards others, are necessary but are not sufficient on their own for the appropriation by the students of democratic values.

Civics demands new ways of working with students but there are difficulties linked to the simultaneous roles she has to play: 'I already know the pupils' problems, mostly related with the school rules, so I can pick some texts, discuss or debate those I am not dealing directly in the class direction duties but I am using my acquaintance of the students to discuss a certain topic'.

The pupils reveal the same difficulty in differentiating the teacher's roles: 'the kids don't understand why they cannot talk about class matters in the English class or in Civics Education, since it is the same teacher, however, when a problem happens I have to solve it, there are things that cannot wait'.

In the absence of a national programme in the new areas, teachers co-operate in the development of each class curriculum project. This provides for new practices in teachers cultures: '... now, everybody knows what one is doing. At the moment we are planning for the articulation of the concept of nationality and the EU in History and Civics Education. We are trying to teach some concepts across the disciplines. Slowly, we are learning how it works, and how to do it naturally'. Mariana stresses the importance of teamwork: 'we work all together. In the beginning of the school year, we organised all the documentation, books, materials ... we gave information, we talked about what was expected in this new area, because some of us had no idea, and may want to test the students, thus, we explained how the qualitative assessment could be done ...'.

According to Mariana, teachers' development depends more on individual initiative and professionalism than on the central or local authority support. However, Mariana does not see the need for specific teacher preparation in Civics Education: 'there are things that we need to study by ourselves, it is better to research and find out what is better for us than

to be told what should be done ... it also depends on how we learn to develop our own skills, isn't it?'

Conclusions

Comparing these three cases, it was evident that, though in different ways, they all had a strong commitment to the teaching profession and a concern for the human dimension in their pupils. They showed a positive attitude towards the recent valuing of Citizenship Education as part of the school curriculum. Each felt that above all they are educating their pupils as whole persons, and thus assumed naturally their new responsibilities as Civics teachers.

Concerning the link between teaching Civics and Class Direction, though they stated some reservations, they also noted its possibilities. In general, they were critical of the absence of criteria for choosing those teachers who are assigned tutoring responsibilities randomly without having an adequate profile or experience suited to the task. A second restriction is the lack of time for dealing with the collective of pupils in the space and time allotted for Civics Education. While the lack of prescription may facilitate a less bureaucratic relationship with the pupils, teachers run the risk of deviation from the actual goals of citizenship education.

On the other hand, these teachers accept the ambiguity in the legislation concerning the concepts of Citizenship and Civics Education. The assumption is that Citizenship Education is a broad cross-curricular goal, while the objectives for Civics Education are more explicit and focussed on the personal and social development of students. For two of our teachers their collective work allowed that, but for the third, the persistence of teachers' individualism and the school cultures did not permit the exploration of the possibilities of a real interdisciplinary articulation and, thus to break out of the traditional teaching isolation.

In the curriculum development for Civics Education, the three cases reported similar strategies, namely, flexibility and openness in introducing daily themes related to the school or society, and attending to the pupils' proposals. These three teachers paid attention to the development of interpersonal relationships among pupils, as well as to their competency in social life that constitutes, anyway, the same objectives for tutoring as Class Director. However, these teachers may in some ways present a limited interpretation of what citizenship means - they are also taking risks in planning as apparently they do not follow any coherent focus or organising conceptual frame.

On the positive side, it seems that new routines are taking place: centring the learning process on the pupils and loosening the teacher's hegemony in the classroom. Teachers are using course manuals sparingly and instead are collecting all sorts of resources, not only to bring into the classroom but also for self-development. Pupil assessment is predominantly formative but still hesitant.

Finally, although acknowledging the need for more information and development, these teachers appear to value learning from peers with previous experience or in informal settings where they may exchange ideas and experiences. They do not reject external enhancement, but are willing to trust their own capacity for self-improvement. These teachers assume a reflexive practice associated with a discourse valuing teachers' work, and a positive personal self-image based on their caring for the pupils.

Their sense of autonomy and personal responsibility may be a good indicator that changes are taking place in Portuguese schools. Young children are using their 'voice', choosing topics of discussion, even demonstrating enthusiasm. Emphasising citizenship implies challenging dormant cultures in the schools and, in our opinion, what is being done by these teachers who are overwhelmed by pupils' problems, is not enough.

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