Putting knowledge in context:
Curriculum contextualization in history classes

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to study how a school discipline such as history has been required to put its knowledge in context, including its central knowledge (without which school matters lose their identity) as well as methods and the reasons for which this has been done. Putting knowledge in context, which is seen as a way of producing curriculum meaning from the pupils' points of view, is associated with curriculum coherence. Nevertheless, putting knowledge in context has often been put into practice in very technical ways (related to the 'what for?' question) or associated with ethnical purposes, with very little accordance to multiculturalism ideals.

Thus the purpose of this study is to examine ways of putting knowledge in context, as Portuguese legal frameworks are recently requiring this change. With regards to empirical methodology, we will focus on eighth grade history teachers' learning proposals. This research was conducted by educational observations among a professional sample. Evidence from the study suggests that pupils' achievement was always (in every dimension) considered good or very good but curricular contextualization practices are not as common as we would have assumed.

Key Words:

Curriculum contextualization; Curriculum coherence; Culturally Relevant Education; Relevant Education.

Introduction

   Curriculum contextualization has gradually become a central theme in discussions about teaching and learning. Understood as a way to bring teaching-learning closely to students' realities, contextualization is a prerequisite in addressing the content and organization of activities to be undertaken in the classroom. By helping students to relate the educational tasks with their knowledge and everyday experiences, curricular contextualization facilitates the linking of theory and practice. Furthermore, it allows students to give meaning and value to what they learn in school. Therefore, contextualizing knowledge at school is a process that aims to produce a meaningful curriculum for students. Beane (1997) calls a curriculum that contextualizes knowledge a coherent curriculum. So, these features are, once again, a way to answer the old and recurrent question "What knowledge is of the most worth?" This question assumes a new significance with globalization changes and globalizing policies and their impact on national curriculum guidelines.

   Furthermore, this is a current concern in several countries (Karseth & Sivesind, 2010; Westbury, 2008; Moore, 2000) and enlightens discussions about the importance of "cultivation of national cultures as an overall purpose of the curriculum and how does this match idea of qualifying students for life" (Karseth & Sivesind, 2010, 103).

   In a scholarship that follows the principle of achievement for all (UNESCO, 2007), making knowledge significant to students is a main purpose of any curriculum. To produce meaningful curricula has been pursued and explained by different curriculum theories and policies. This reflects these theories and policies differences concerning what is to be taught and the purpose of learning. In fact, curriculum choices are not neutral, as Bernstein (1990) states. On such matter, Lopes (2002) also argues that contextualization is frequently understood as a way of installed power legitimization as it seeks a higher insertion into the productive world. In her view, such purpose limits the cultural dimension of education. Otherwise, Young (2007) argues that it is needed to avoid New Sociology of Education' relativism, due to the fact that was responsible for a misconception of knowledge social constructivism. Looking to curriculum in such narrow view is to reduce it to interests and perspectives of knower and depending exclusively of his or her experience. Therefore, author proposes that knowledge to be taught must be powerful and broader than the student's concrete and cultural experience. "K*nowledge is power*" means, to Young (2007), that knowledge promotes power when it avoids, both, relativism and the uniqueness and dominant position. So, to be powerful, knowledge must be socially recognized and appropriated by knowers

   The present study, having in mind that contextualization is a way to promote socially and powerful knowledge, it focuses a set of theoretical issues that provide a conceptual dimension to contextualization. Those issues come from epistemological, sociological, curricular and political theories, such as Mode 2 of science production (Gibbons, 1994; Nowotny, 2001); Stephen Ball's policy cycles; school culture concept and curriculum coherence. Figure 1 summarizes this effort.

Theories' dimension	concepts	authors
epistemology	Mode 2 of science production	Gibbons 1994; Novothy, 2001
Curriculum Policy	Policy cycles	S. Ball, 1992, 1994
Curriculum studies	School culture curriculum coherence	Forquin, 1989

Figure 1- theoretical structure

1) The concept of contextualization of scientific production, as featured in Mode 2 of knowledge production, configures new relationship between science and society. "When compared with Mode 1, Mode 2 is more reflective and socially engaged, which implies a wider, more temporary and heterogeneous group of practitioners, collaborating on a problem defined in a specific and localized context." (Gibbons, 1994, 3)

The main idea that is associated with the relativistic dimension of knowledge production is related to its dependence on societal demands and to economic and political power. Usually named scientific contextualization, this phenomenon is characterized by the following aspects:

i.   Greater interdependence between more open systems of knowledge production and growing complexity and uncertainty in society;

ii. Scientific processes transformation by increasing communication between society and science;

iii. The emergence of socially robust knowledge production, which places increased challenges to simple validation logic of scientific production;

iv. The transgressive nature of scientific specialties at a time because they need to respond to the complexity and uncertainty, and because they don't answer, only, to strictly scientific problems. (Nowotny et al, 2001)

Settled changes affect the structure of scientific production, its relationship with the public, ways in which scientific community thinks about itself and, inevitably, defines ways to organize relevant information to be learned.

2) The field of Curriculum policy has been following a trend closely related to the historical development of educational policies and the ideological nuances that underpin it.

In this study, the understanding curriculum policy is aligned with S. Ball's idea (1992, 1994) that curriculum policy is a continuous cycle where different contexts will result, such as:

i. The context of influence, in which the political discourse process begins. Within this context there is an interaction between government officials, political parties, social groups with economic power, local agencies and international organizations (epistemic communities);

ii. The context of text production, which represents the space where central government moves itself – the government, through the ministries and central offices. In close consultation with the context of influence, the government draws up policy papers, producing legal and political documents that coordinate and organize curriculum development;

iii. The context of practice is related to the work of teachers, in which curriculum policies are reinterpreted. The policy cycle approach by Ball (1992, 1994) clarifies the curricular contextualization concept as it is used in the present study. This is important to establish to what extent policies are different from interpretations given by teachers, in schools' curriculum development.

3) It is cliché to say that it is not possible to think of education without simultaneously thinking about culture and the relationships between them. Education is a dialogic process, formative and transformative (Freire, 1976). Necessarily, this process involves contact, transmission and acquisition of knowledge and developing skills, and habits and values. That constitutes what Forquin (1993: 10) calls the "content of education." Therefore, when one's propose curricular contextualization it is assumed that school education is not only a knowledge and culture reproduction but also a production.

Following critical discourses about school, contextualization approach criticizes a single cultural model, criticizing also the assimilation's and homogenizing intentionality in which it is based. On the opposite, contextualization makes an apology for a content selection that encompasses the cultural diversity of the school population.

The belief that guides us is supported by Forquin (1989) as he states the idea that "the contemporary pedagogical thinking cannot run without a debate on cultural issues and cultural elements of different types of educational choices" (ibid, 10). We follow Forquin, when he concludes that education in general, "never transmits the cultural heritage as a symbolic and coherent unit" because at the same time that it delivers some knowledge of the past, it forgets, abandons or rejects other information. On this issue, it is important to recognize "teachers' memory" power and their ability for "active forgetting" that will help to create a "cultural school selection."

Endorsing these ideas from Forquin we do not forget conditions under which knowledge is distributed and recontextualized, that is, what is privileged in education and how it is delivered. It has crucial importance to what we call the intercultural education pedagogical device, as it creates a new pedagogical discourse that differentiates means to acquire knowledge, knowledge interaction and cultural experiences.

As previously stated, the purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which history teachers have contextualized history knowledge, including its nuclear knowledge, without which it loses its identity, as well as methods and reasons for such contextualization efforts.

History is a subject matter relevant to this type of contextualization as it comes from a national perspective with national aims. As Foster & Nicholls argue (2004), upon an analysis of how textbooks from different countries portray World War II, nations tend to interpret it differently, from their own cultural, historical, and geopolitical perspectives.

Framed by this theoretical referential this study aims (1) To characterize curriculum contextualization modes implemented in Portuguese History classrooms; (2) To identify reasons that justify curriculum contextualization processes, carried on in History classes.

There are three main questions that guide our empirical study. There are:

1. How has history as a school subject put knowledge in context?

2. How have legal regulations required this change in history classes?

3. Which learning practices do History teachers propose to their students that could be relevant to the contextualization effort?

Methodologies

This research lays on two sets of data that are relevant to study 8th grade history classes under Stephen Ball's perspective: The legal regulatory frameworks (influence context) and the case study of history teachers' practice proposals made to their students (practice context). In order to perform the comparison between intended curriculum (influence context) and implemented curriculum (practice context) we thought that legal regulatory documental analysis and case study were the appropriated research paths. Namely, case studies have shown the diversity in teachers' understanding of curricular contextualization.

Collected data is from one academic year (2008-2009) and it focus on teachers' learning practice records from four history teachers (three were female and one was male) from four schools in the city of Porto. These records are lesson plans (i), written descriptions following a guideline (ii) and reflections (iii) that those 4 teachers did, regarding their own curricular choices made when they work with a specific 8th grade History class.

Data analysis occurred in a two-stage process. In the first stage we analyzed legal documents such as the Basic Education Curriculum (2001) and the History Syllabus (1999)

To perform the above official documents analysis, we searched for topics related to contextualization aims highlighting issues and arguments such as reasons, mandatory practices, that could be correlated to main subject (Scott, 2000; Ozga, 2000).

In the second stage of the analysis and to study history teachers' practice proposals for their students (practice context), we used the reports (including lesson plans, written

descriptions and reflections) from the four teachers in our study, all of which came from the eighth grade.

To study teachers' learning practice records we performed content analysis. For this study, curricular contextualization was represented by teaching practices, related to the following dimensions: (i) Historical methodologies used. (ii)True materials used - as they are seen and used in Curricular Development Studies, true materials are intended as objects, machineries, and processes for which the main purpose is not academic. (iii) Intervention projects. (iv) Traditional and cultural issues. (v) Local issues and resources. Figure 2 represents the content analysis dimensions.
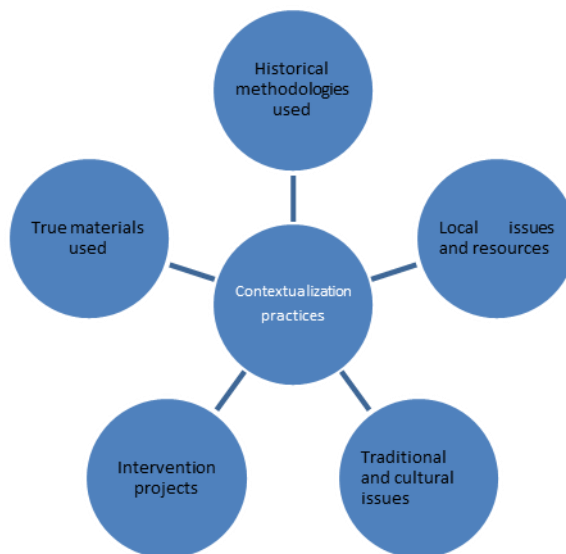

Figure 2- content analysis dimensions

For each of these five dimensions we wanted to know their occurrence and frequency in each particular class. Additionally, we wanted to establish the main objectives that justified the use of each curricular dimension, such as:

- To demonstrate subject knowledge theories;
- To promote the interest and motivation of pupils
- To improve pupils' research skills
- To develop pupils' inductive reasoning
- To develop pupils' hypothetical/deductive reasoning
- To explain the social impact of school subjects
- To explain the intervention power of school subjects

To establish the importance of the objectives in each dimension, the teachers were questioned about the subject. Furthermore we identified the pedagogical practices associated with that dimension in written descriptions made by teachers related with particular History classes.

In addition, we wanted to know the importance of the following issues as ways to improve developed dimensions: textbook guidance; education of teachers; previous teacher' training; teachers' self – training; school department planning; peer cooperation

among teachers; pupils' proposals. Furthermore, we wanted to assess developed curricular practices and related them with student' achievements.

To address the importance attached to the objectives, for each dimension, as well as to establish the importance given to curricular contextualization sources, we asked teachers to give ratings using a scale of 1 to 3.

Some issues were categorized in frequency tables ranging from not existent (0) to always (3) and others were categorized qualitatively, ranging from insufficient (0) to very good (3).

Results

1 - Documental analysis

Curriculum could be treated as a way to produce meaning and identity and also as a safeguard of school culture, still very focused on scientific truth and universal values. In Portugal, these two aims support, respectively, the Basic Education Curriculum (2001) and the History Syllabus (1999). These two main documents that frame History curriculum in Portugal are disconnected both in theoretical and policy perspectives. They reveal two discourses about teaching history: the first centered on the argument for skills; the other connected with thematic content. This represents two trends that were stratified in educational discourses in Portugal during the reorganization of the Basic Education Curriculum process (2000/2001). Since then, those two axes have been a regular feature, underlying the debate on curriculum issues crossing all schooling levels. The National Curriculum for Basic Education emphasizes the specific skills that students should acquire from their education, including treatment information and use of sources, historical understanding, which is structured upon temporality, spatiality and contextualization axes, and communication in history. On the other hand, the History Syllabus gives relief to a more substantive and thematic dimension, namely to concepts and their relation to the dynamics of historical development, which is supposed to make students learn easily.

Thus, the National Curriculum for Basic Education emphasizes its general aims, among others, to "mobilize cultural, scientific and technological knowledge to understand the reality and deal with situations and problems of everyday life" and "adopt appropriate strategies to solve problems and decision "making that students should acquire during their education. These aims and correlated skills to be developed could be understood as this basic link between school curriculum and life. This means that it could be read as an invitation to improve contextualization practices. On the other hand, the History Syllabus emphasizes concepts and information to be taught and establishes a non-compulsory, yet recommended sequence plan. The content organization and sequence is diachronically defined and presents concepts and basic notions considered as essential thematic content.

Even, in Portugal curricula have been gradually becoming less elitist, as it is stated at the National Curriculum for Basic Education, there are still characteristics of an elite culture in History Syllabus. In fact, this document gives greater importance to "know about" than to "know-how" dominate the verb upon the action and focus on written texts instead other expression types.

It is expected that teachers could overpass this gap, but, in fact they work differently in classroom as they feel themselves expected to develop one or another curriculum view.

2 – The practices of history teachers

As stated before the practices of history teachers were analyzed on the following dimensions:

Historical methodologies used, true materials uses, intervention projects, traditional and cultural issues and local issues and resources. These are also the dimensions presented in our results.

Historical methodologies were used by all the teachers in the study. However, two teachers utilized this methodology once or twice during the term while another recurred to it five times. The fourth frequently used historical methodologies such as document and source analysis. Such teaching practices were important to the inquired teachers as they give a better idea of knowledge and theories studied. Two of the teachers also referred to the importance of methodology to show historical social impact. However the most important reason was to promote motivation among pupils. In fact, scores obtained related to this issue were highest and the standard deviation was equal to 0.

To put these methodologies into practice, three of the teachers considered self-training as very important. Only one referred to previous teacher training, school department planning and peer cooperation among teachers as implemented curriculum sources.

Two teachers considered student achievement as very good (another teacher qualified student achievement as good), as it resulted from historical methodologies uses.

True material uses:

True materials (or reproductions or facsimiles) were used by all the teachers in the study. However, two teachers used them one or two times during the term while another used this methodology four times. They used true materials five times, such as facsimiles documents and, on one occasion, astrolabium. True materials are important to teachers as they promote motivation among pupils and show historical social impact. As with the previous dimension, teachers´ scores related to these issues were highest and the standard deviation was equal to 0.

Again, teacher self-training was the main source to teaching practices related to true materials' uses.

Three of the teachers considered their students achievements as good, as the result of the use of true materials. However there were 12 contextualization episodes connected with referred dimension in the studied period.

Intervention projects connected with history content:

There were few occasions of implementation of the intervention projects– only two teachers used such teaching practice and just once did it twice with the same class. Promoting motivation among pupils was, once again, the most important purpose.

However, other objectives were also important, such as : to improve pupils' researching skills; to develop pupils' inductive reasoning , to develop pupils' hypothetical/deductive reasoning , to explain the social impact of school subjects and to explain the intervention power of school subjects, especially on project development.

As has previously occurred with contextualization strategies, student achievement was high. Another interesting feature was the participation of other department teachers in the initiatives.

Traditional and cultural issues:

Only one teacher promoted contextualization practices related to traditional and cultural issues, but she did it eight times during the school term. Two other teachers each promoted these practices one time.

Once again, teacher's objectives were the same: to increase student motivation and to reveal the social impact of history. The self-training of teachers was the main source of use of teaching practices related to traditional and cultural issues. Teachers were satisfied both with the results for students and the achieved objectives. One teacher understood the success of the strategy as a result of the active participation of students, as they researched traditional information that was important to curricular development.

Local issues and resources:

All four teachers inquired recorded curricular practices around local issues and resources, during research time.

However, two teachers utilized that teaching practice once or twice during the term, while another used that methodology three times. The four teachers frequently used local issues and resources, such as documents, stories, local people's biographies, and references to local historical places. A teacher, who used frequently historical methodologies, was the same that used true materials, and hers records referred those elements to characterize in such separate dimensions. Once again, the teachers' objectives were the same: to increase pupils' motivation and to reveal historical social impact.

The main sources of curricular practices related to historical methodologies uses were, again, self-training of teachers and history textbook suggestions.

We found that contextualization practices were important to increase pupils' achievements, to foster organized teaching procedures.

Discussion and conclusion

Curricular contextualization results from a continuum of decisions made in different contexts and by different actors during curriculum development processes. Therefore, a study like the present could find different teaching practices that emphasize different perspectives about the construction of knowledge by actors involved.

In a more specific way, the main research conclusions were:

- History methodologies and true materials are the contextualization practices used by four teachers studied. An intervention project was implemented by only one teacher.
- The most important objective that justified contextualization practices of teachers was to increase pupils' motivation, independent of the features of contextualization practices. Moreover, low or null standard deviation scores reinforced the previous statement related to the main reasons for which teachers pursue a contextualization effort.
- History textbooks were important to suggest curricular initiatives related to Local issues and resource dimensions.
- Teacher training was the greatest lacking source of curriculum practices. However, self-training was the most common source of curriculum practice.
- Teamwork among teachers was rare, either to plan initiatives, or to implement them. In fact, it was only in project intervention that we encountered a reference related to department team work
- The achievement of students was always (in each dimension) considered good or very good, as it resulted from contextualizing teaching practices. However, the teachers in this study did not often implement contextualization practices.

Given the different teaching practices encountered, it is quite possible that this situation is due to different epistemic cultures that shaped the initial training of teachers, which we believe is connected to referred to discrepancy among legal documents. This could also explain how difficult and strenuous it is to implement contextualization practices more often. Another related explanation could be a more individualistic approach that teachers still have concerning their tasks.

The results of that exploration suggest that while the teachers were satisfied with their students' accomplishments where contextualizing practices were used, they lacked formal training. If they had formal training they might use more of these practices and therefore have a greater impact on student learning. Part of the problem may be competing, disparate views of education as written in the government documents.

In conclusion, curriculum contextualization must be included in the teacher training agenda and, moreover, in the priorities of curriculum development in schools.

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