



National curriculum vs curricular adaptation – teachers' perspectives

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Abstract

The “education for all” motto and the concerns with equality and justice, revealed the need to provide the same opportunities of knowledge acquisition for all students, which argued the need for adaptation to the national curriculum, by teachers. Many studies argue that school education is better achieved and gains quality when school content is adapted and teachers become curricular developers (Priestley, 2010; Leite & Fernandes, 2011). When teachers are able to adapt the national curriculum with students' different learning and cultural experiences, school success increases (Sahasewiyon, 2004). These initiatives take time, demanding a thorough preparation from teachers, competing with the extent of curricula to teach. This triggers tension in teachers' work within the classroom, specifically concerning innovation initiatives.

Considering this, within a research project concerning curricular contextualization, it seemed important to explore teachers' perceptions on the duality “*national curriculum vs curricular adaptation*”. To do so, interviews were conducted to teachers, from three northern Portuguese secondary schools, responsible for teaching the final year of Portuguese, History, Mathematics, Biology and Geology, Physics and Chemistry.

This research allowed the understanding of the challenges teachers' face in their daily practices concerning curriculum. Mainly, teachers' admitted to practice some curriculum adaptation, but stress that the pressure for fulfilling the entire curriculum, and the length of curricula, constitute impediments and obstacles to curriculum innovation and their role as curriculum developers. Nevertheless, they express the willingness to extend the national curriculum through different approaches and act as curriculum developers.

Keywords: national curriculum; curriculum adaptation; teachers' perceptions.

1 Introduction

School education, in Europe, has been target of attention in order to improve educational systems and meet a set of goals concerning the population literacy levels (European Union Council, 2011). The “*education for all*” motto, originated the need of the national curriculum be adapted, aiming to ensure that every student, despite the social origin, had access to the same opportunities for success. Therefore, concerns with school education quality originated new research, which are pointing towards concepts and practices such as *differentiation*, *personalized learning*, and *curricular adaptation*. Research showed that students beneficiate with a diversified approach.

Recent studies argue the benefits of a differentiated approach to curriculum and of curricular adaptation to meet students and social backgrounds and cultures. This entails the concept of teachers as curriculum developers, in the sense that they are the ones responsible for teaching. But schools' reality presents a set of conditions that can enable or difficult this change, demanding a better understanding of the factors influencing educational systems, concerning curriculum adaptation practices. These questions were addressed in a research project focusing *curricular contextualization* (PTDC/CPE-CED/113768/2009 (<http://www.fpce.up.pt/contextualizar>), which is “a *didactical-pedagogical strategy that aims to promote the students school success and the improvement of their learning. This can be done by adapting curricular contents in order to bring e them closer to students and to the environment where teaching and learning occurs and, therefore, as a result, making them more significant and understandable*” (Fernandes et al, 2012:6).

This project rests on the idea that students' learning can be promoted and increased when teachers' are able to use the knowledge and curricular content and adapt it in a more meaningful and interesting way. This research project



covered a range of factors related to curriculum adaptation, within curriculum contextualization. In this paper we present the conclusions concerning the duality "*national curriculum vs curricular adaptation*", based on teachers' opinions and perceptions, concerning both its impacts, as well as the challenges teachers' face with curriculum adaptation.

2 Curriculum adaptation – some theoretical considerations

Concerns with the quality of school education, with the assurance of equity and justice, and with students' achievement rates led to the implementation of a national curriculum, attempting to address the generality of students. However, continuous research on education revealed the need for changes, concerned with social aspects and with the development of a coherent curriculum (Beane, 2003; Nieveen & Kuiper, 2012). The attention to and concern with the increasing cultural diversity in schools, and the search for higher social equity set the basis for a change in curriculum development processes (Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007). In this sense, many studies were developed, which resulted in a set of suggestions to be considered when rethinking teaching and learning processes, including curriculum adaptation.

Recent studies argue in favor of teachers becoming curricular developers (Priestley, 2010; Leite & Fernandes, 2011), defending that teaching and learning gains quality when school content is adapted to meet different realities, and when it is developed through a number of diversified strategies. These studies stress that, when teachers adapt the national curriculum with students' different learning and cultural experiences, school success increases (Sahasewiyon, 2004). The consideration of aspects close to students' lives, to their interests, to their background, to their culture, to their life stories when developing curriculum and teaching, seems to improve students' interest in school, and to increase their learning. Hence, the use of curriculum adaptation strategies is particularly important to meet two goals: the respect for students' diversity (Yamauchi, 2003; Kalbach & Forester, 2006) and the promotion of school success (Sealey & Noyes, 2010; Braund & Reiss, 2006).

Research argues that taking into account the features of the place where school education is developed, the life habits, social background, daily local routines constitutes a promising starting point for developing a curriculum that can easily be related to real life situations, increasing students' understanding of such matters (Smith, 2005; Paliwal & Subramaniam, 2006). Likewise, in order for the curriculum to be significant and understandable to students, it should consider their interests and lives (Cook-Sather, 2006), and students should be actively engaged in their learning (Souto-Manning, 2008). When students are actively involved in the learning process, they will most likely understand school contents, and reach better outcomes (Hartnell-Young & Vetere, 2008; Goodson & Crick, 2009). Also, research revealed that teaching and learning benefits from diversified approaches to connect with different students and make lessons more interesting and motivating (Gillespie, 2002; Yamauchi, 2003; King et al, 2007). This rests on the ability of curriculum adaptation.

Research also showed that curricular adaptation initiatives demand time and a thorough preparation, which involve rethinking pedagogical practices, the approach to curriculum and lesson planning. But the obligation of fulfilling the entire length of a national curriculum, the establishment of educational goals and the constant pressure to reach better results, competes with curriculum adaptation. Therefore, this can be a tricky process for teachers as the main actors responsible for establishing equilibrium between the national curriculum and its adaptation, especially when it requires new approaches and methods (Davies, 2006; Choppin, 2009).

Within the above referred research project, it seemed relevant to explore teachers' perceptions on the duality "*national curriculum vs curricular adaptation*", concerning their motivation for curriculum adaptation, as well as their understanding of its challenges.

3 Methodology

The research methodology followed in the research project, was of a qualitative nature, developed through a number of qualitative techniques of data collection and analysis. The project privileged an approach that enables a direct contact with the subjects, as well as the consideration of their specificities, their characteristics. At the same time, the research team aimed to collect rich and meaningful information, by listening and enabling the subjects to freely express themselves and to express their opinions, feelings, perceptions and understandings.



Three northern Portuguese schools were considered in this research, and interviews were conducted to teachers responsible for teaching the final year of Portuguese, History, Mathematics, Biology and Geology, Physics and Chemistry, in these schools, and to students from the selected teachers.

Bearing in mind the intention of exploring their perceptions, semi-structured interviews and *focus group* interviews (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Hopf, 2004) were conducted to both teachers and students. A total of 44 teachers and 42 students were interviewed. The interviews followed a predetermined structure, based on a previously developed theoretical framework, but open to changes and adjustments according to eventual needs. The data analysis was performed through content analysis (Krippendorff, 2003), using the software Nvivo 10, in order to explore the information and unravel meanings, central features and main traces of discourse, and to organize the information in meaningful categories. This process allowed the identification of perceptions on the use of curriculum contextualization, and consequently, curricular adaptation, and its impacts on students achievement, as well as to identify constraints and benefits of such practices.

For the purposes of this paper, only the views and perceptions from teachers are considered.

4 Results and conclusions

The research conducted with the teachers from the three northern Portuguese schools revealed that the issue of curricular adaptation, through curricular contextualization, is surrounded both by positive outcomes, as well as by constraints and some difficulties for teachers. By listening to teachers' perspectives and opinions on this matter, it was possible to identify three sets of aspects related to curriculum adaptation practices: *a)* teachers' motivation for performing curriculum adaptation; *b)* the benefits identified by these teachers from adaptation strategies; and *c)* the difficulties teachers face when trying to develop curriculum adaptation. This section is organized to present the research results and conclusions meeting these three focuses.

4.1 Teachers' motivation for performing curriculum adaptation

When asked if they performed curriculum adaptation and, if so, why did they choose to do it, teachers' answers were varied, but the majority of them confirm to use curriculum adaptation. In what concerns to the motivation behind this practice, teachers' answers were clear and pointed for the higher goal of promoting students' learning on the subjects they taught, as well as the students' motivation for learning. Teachers' felt that the social, cultural and economical diversity in their classrooms, and also, in two of the considered schools, the specificity of the school's social context, demanded a more careful and attentive teaching approach, in order to transform generic and general subject contents into a more comprehensive and meaningful version. They felt the need of some adaptation to the national curriculum, aiming to make it closer to the knowledge of students' daily life and background, providing it with meaning and significance, as stated in the following excerpts from the interviews:

"... the concern with making the learning more meaningful for students"

"I don't want my students to repeat the content. I want them to understand and that what they learn is useful for them"

"... for me it is essential that the student realizes why he's doing that, why it is done like that"

Hence, the teachers' were motivated by curriculum adaptation potential of increasing students' interest in learning and improving their achievement, as expressed in the following statements:

"They like. They participate because they see a real thing there"

"I believe it is also motivational for students. It enhances the gain of knowledge"



4.2 Benefits from curriculum adaptation strategies

The previous subsection focused teachers' motivation for performing curriculum adaptation and innovation in school, highlighting the intention of promoting students learning and achievement rates. This led to the question of whether such practices had real and visible impacts in students' learning. Teachers' opinions were not as much assertive concerning students achievement, as they could not clearly and undoubtedly correlate curriculum adaptation with students' results, but on the other hand, they were peremptory in affirm an increase of motivation and understanding of subject content.

"Knowledge becomes part of them. They experience what they are learning, what they study"

"Even an equity of opportunities... And also, I believe it makes students' learning more meaningful"

"They see it in practice. It's interesting because they experience in practice what they learn theoretically"

That is to say that teachers identify, as a result of curriculum adaptation practices, mainly, that students felt more motivated in classes, their interest in the subject content increased as the content was related to more familiar and contextualized knowledge, and consequently, their understanding of such content was, also, promoted.

4.3 Difficulties of developing curriculum adaptation

Even though the teachers from this study clearly expressed their intentions of performing curriculum adaptation, and identify positive impacts from its use, they also revealed their concerns and difficulties with that strategy. The Portuguese education systems respects and is guided by a national curriculum, which is generally used in every school and must be fulfilled. Also, public Portuguese schools have an externally defined time schedule for each subject. On top of that, teachers from the school subjects considered in this study also face the pressure of a national exam in the final year. All this aspects form the basis of constraints and difficulties that teachers face when performing curriculum adaptation.

Looking at the interviews, the main difficulties are related to the length of the national curriculum for each subject and the obligation of its fulfilment, which difficult curriculum adaptation. In order for teachers to cover the entire curriculum in the school year, all teaching time must be dedicated to it, and the possible adaptation take precious time, as shown in the following statements from the interviews:

"I think is more the issue of the subject program, which is a burden for us... and trying to go around it takes time, it's complicated. It's not easy"

"I mostly think it is a matter of time... that is the most common and valid complaint"

"Because it is a large program in my subject, so there is a planning to be rigorously respected in order to fulfil the program length"

This is why most teachers feel that they do not have the opportunity for more innovation strategies. Also, teachers feel that the national exam and students preparation for it demands that all extra time is spent in reinforcing content, instead of reinventing them and teaching strategies:

"... but the final year, the exam year, is more concern with time. They are concern with national exams and time..."

"... but in the final year, because of the time constraints, we need to be more careful with those initiatives"

5 Final remarks

From the interviews with teachers it was possible to draw some conclusions on the duality *"national curriculum vs curriculum adaptation"*. The general assumption that curriculum adaptation has positive effects in the teaching and learning process is shared by these teachers. They mostly believe this strategy enables a richer learning environment and more productive lessons. Teachers also believe that the use of curriculum adaptation in their classes helps to improve students' motivation and learning. Such beliefs are in line with recent research on school and education and reinforce the arguments defending curriculum adaptation strategies in schooling. It is following those beliefs that the teachers from this study admitted to perform some curriculum adaptation, whenever possible and necessary.



Nevertheless, teachers' discourse also revealed constraints and difficulties inherent to the existence of a curriculum and a lesson scheduling somewhat defined nationally, to be entirely fulfilled, alongside with the pressure to prepare students, especially in the final year, for national exams. Hence, teachers list as their main concerns and impediments for a more frequent curriculum adaptation, the lack of time and opportunity due to the need of fulfilling the national curriculum defined for their school subjects, and the pressure from the incoming national exams. Also, they refer the length of the curricula, as an obstacle to curriculum innovation. Nevertheless, they express the willingness to extend the national curriculum through different approaches and act as curriculum developers.

Considering the theoretical and scientific knowledge produced in recent years on curriculum and education, and particularly, the conclusions from this study, it seems that policymakers and curriculum developers and planners need to take their time on studying and analyzing what really works in teaching and learning, as presented by the school contexts, by teachers and by students. There is a clear need of understanding and considering the educational reality and to take it into account when implementing political measures, or performing changes in schools.

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