



The discourses on the curriculum made public issues by the media

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Abstract

The school curriculum is a social and historical construction that results from the ways in which different stakeholders frame the purposes of Education and translate them into curricular decisions (Goodson, 1988; Leite & Fernandes, 2012). The negotiation implied in this decision-making process is influenced and even validated by public representations of education and school curriculum. The media have a key role in this process because they are crucial in building public opinion regarding educational issues and citizenship (Mendes, 2004). Under the pretense of objectivity that guides their action, the media report not only national and local public policies about the curriculum but also viewpoints of different stakeholders. Some attention has been given to the media coverage of educational issues in Portugal (e.g. Abrantes, 2009) with evidence that curricular issues have been gaining visibility (Freitas, 2008).

The paper reports a study of the importance given to curricular issues in 2 national newspapers published during 2 periods of preparation of the school year (2009 and 2013). Through a content analysis procedure (Bardin, 2000), it specifically aims at identifying (i) the main issues reported in the published news about education; (ii) the number of news about curriculum; (iii) the involved subjects; (iv) the authors; and (v) the key ideas reflected in their reported discourses, as they shape the viewpoints involved in the issues. The discussion involves an analysis of the curricular issues focused on the news. The analysed newspapers give little importance to curricular issues, which can be an indicator of a remaining limited attention given to curricular issues by the media. The reported curricular issues result from ongoing changes in curricular policies. A higher attention from the media to curricular issues is recommended, so that an engagement of other members of civil society beyond those related to schooling education could be triggered.

Keywords: curricular discourses; media; newspapers; social construction of Curriculum.

1 Introduction

The school curriculum is a social and historical construction that results from the ways in which different stakeholders frame the purposes of Education and translate them into curricular decisions (Goodson, 1988; Leite & Fernandes, 2012). The negotiation implied in this decision-making process is influenced and even validated by public representations of education and school curriculum. In fact, it is possible to find a more intensified participation of civil society in school, in aspects such as school based curriculum and school direction boards (Kärkkäinen, 2012).

The media have a key role in this process because they are crucial in building public opinion regarding educational issues and citizenship (Mendes, 2004). Indeed, the media define the issues that become the focus of public attention and those that are declared as unimportant. Therefore, under the pretense of objectivity that guides their action, the media report not only national and local public policies about the curriculum but also the viewpoints of different stakeholders. But, as Mendes (2004) emphasized, the media also carry an ideological load in their discourses that is usually based on values underlying the arguments and alleged facts that they report. Moreover, even when a particular media strives to follow a policy of pluralism and neutrality publishing diverse viewpoints, it is possible to find the above mentioned ideological load in editing options, such as the article' size, section, publication page, etc.



Some attention has been given to the media coverage of education issues in Portugal (e.g. Abrantes, 2009) with indicators that news on education issues are treated as marketing to sell newspapers which dictates the habit of reporting education only as extraordinary events rather than as everyday events. Abrantes (2009) has illustrated this with a study of the Portuguese media coverage of school failure, an issue that was almost absent of the media he analyzed, even when the school failure rates were higher in Portugal than in other European countries.

Assuming that the media build a citizenship profile, and since education issues are a part of public interest as much as they regard public services paid by everyone taxes, it can be argued that the media should inform more frequently and accurately everyday cases related with education issues in general, and curriculum issues in particular.

Indeed, it seems that curriculum issues have been gaining visibility in the media (Freitas, 2008). This could be partially explained by several changes in recent Portuguese curricular policies, often opposed to the public opinion of what should be the action of a quality school (Freitas, 2008). By the other hand, the increased frequency and visibility of international comparative studies and school rankings can also explain a recent growing interest of media in curricular aspects of the Portuguese educational system (Afonso & Costa, 2009).

In this context, the goal of the work reported in the present paper was to identify the importance given by the media to curriculum and the purposes of such attention.

2 Methods

This paper reports a study of the importance given to curriculum issues in 2 national newspapers published during 2 periods of preparation of the school year (2009 and 2013). It specifically aims at identifying (i) the main issues reported in the published news about education; (ii) the number of news about curriculum in the news; (iii) the involved subjects; (iv) the authors; and (v) the key ideas reflected in their reported discourses, as they shape the viewpoints involved in the issues.

The choice of newspapers editions to be analyzed was determined by the frequency, target audiences, subject matter, geographical scope and distribution, format and technology of distribution. Both analyzed newspapers were daily newspapers with a general audience as target, generalist format, national distribution and availability by paper and online. Whereas Newspaper A has a long format with several types of texts (small and long articles, editorials, chronicles, opinion articles and letters to directors) and an average number of 50 pages per edition, Newspaper B has a shorter format limited to news articles and opinion articles with an average number of 14 pages per edition. Although the printed editions were analyzed, their availability online was an advantageous feature that was taken into account. Newspaper B had open access online to the printed edition and Newspaper A made available for this research a temporary license to online access to the printed edition, which facilitated the analysis procedure.

The period of analysis constituted the months of April, May and June, both in 2009 and 2013, due to the fact that in terms of educational agenda, this period marks the end of one school year as well as preparing for the next school year, a circumstance assumed to determine enhanced visibility to educational issues by the media. All texts of the daily editions in these periods were subjected to a triage in which texts were selected for analysis if their title, lead sentence or frequent references covered the terms "education", "school" or "university".

Once selected for analysis, the texts were subjected to a content analysis procedure (Bardin, 2000) mixing a quantitative and qualitative approach according to the categories of analysis presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of analysis.

CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS	
STRUCTURAL CATEGORIES	CONTENT CATEGORIES
Title	Scope of the new
Year / Month	Nature of issue
Newspaper	Issue
Type of text	Involved subjects
Level of highlight	Teaching level
Number of paragraphs	Type of school
Photo	Key ideas
Author	Brief history



To ascertain the main issues reported in the news, it was made a simple count of occurrences in the data about educational issues in general and curriculum issues in particular, as well as its nature. The same analysis was made to ascertain the involved subjects, the texts' authors and the key ideas, categories that were assumed to be suitable indicators of the viewpoints reflected in the reported discourses in the news contents.

3 Presentation and discussion of results

The main educational issues reported in the analysed news are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

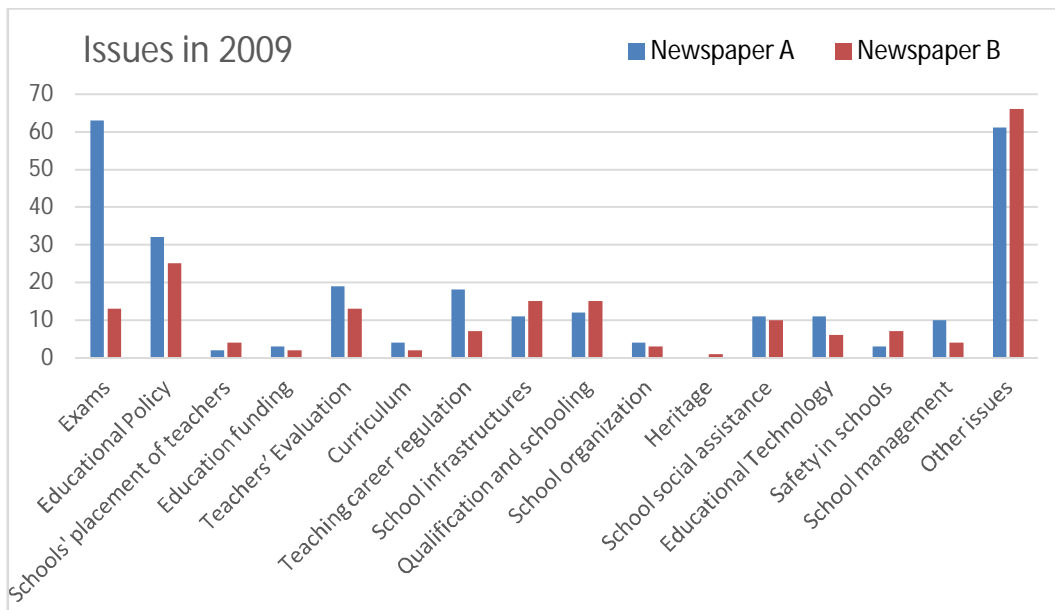


Figure 1: Main issues covered in 2009 news.

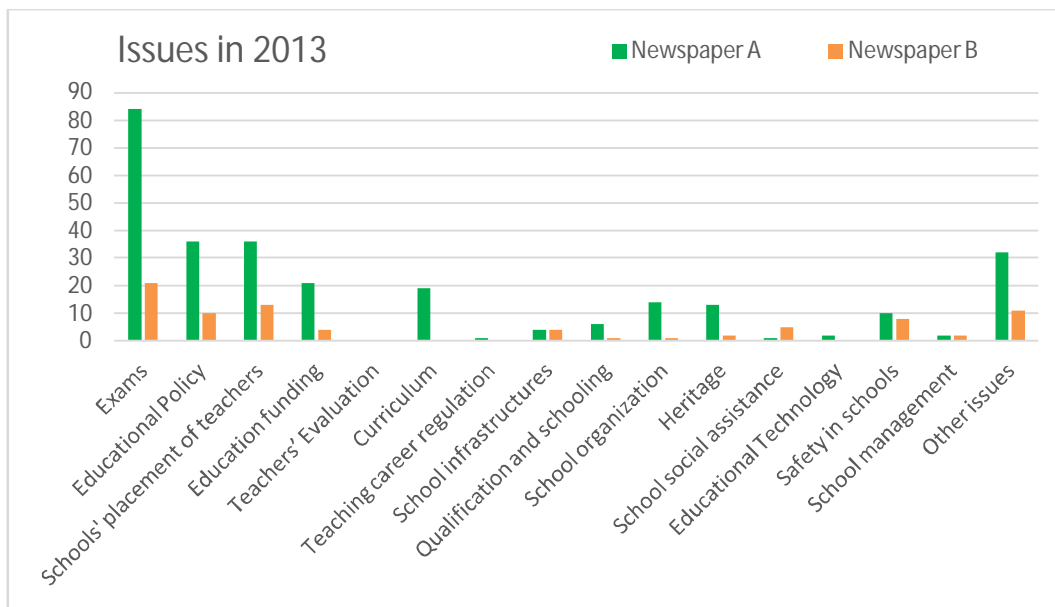


Figure 2: Main issues covered in 2013 news.

As can be verified in the Figures, issues of Exams and Educational Policy were the most covered in the same period in both the years of 2009 and 2013. The big number of news about Exams published in Newspaper A has to do with the fact that in matters of National Exams, this newspaper usually publishes an article, the used exam nationwide, the predefined criteria to correct them, and viewpoints from students, teachers and professional associations of teachers.



In 2009, issues of teachers' evaluation and teaching career regulation were widely reported in the news which had to do with important legal changes that were happening in these matters. By the other hand, in 2013, issues of schools' placement of teachers and education funding were given a higher attention, which has to do with the intensive cuts in the state's funding of education due to the ongoing economical and debt crisis.

Curriculum issues seem to be a weak point in the news coverage of education, although some differences upward can be found in news of 2013 when comparing with 2009. In fact, in 2009, only 1,52% of all the educational issues on news of Newspaper A were about the Curriculum (4), and 1,04% of Newspaper B were about this issue (2). In 2013, this percentage gets a little bit higher in Newspaper A: 6,76% of all the published news about education was about the Curriculum (19). In Newspaper B any news about the Curriculum was identified.

But why the Curriculum was considered an issue? The nature of the reported issues in the news about the Curriculum are the ones presented in Figures 3 and 4

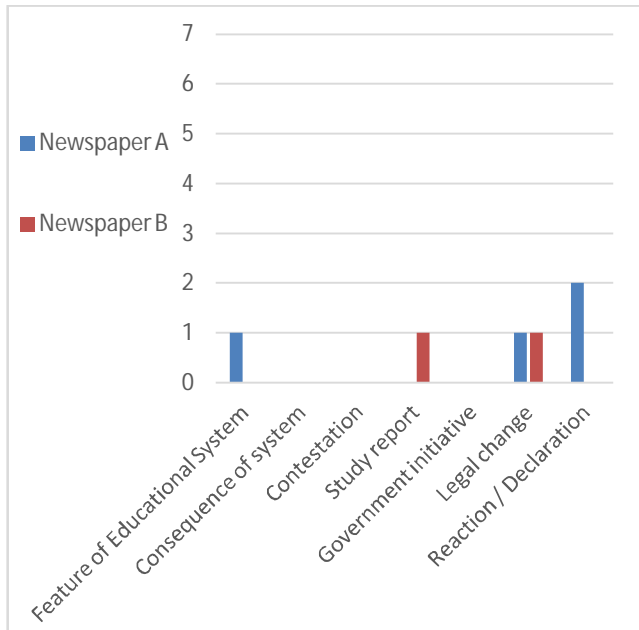


Figure 3: Nature of issues covered in 2009 news.

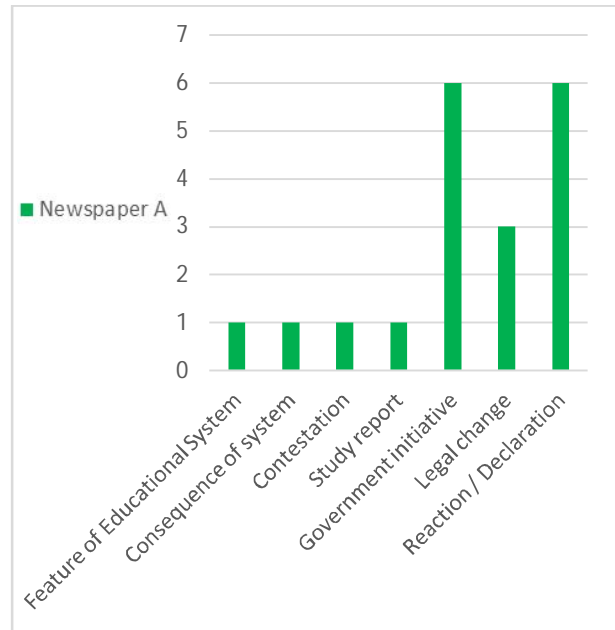


Figure 4: Nature of issues covered in 2013 news.

Figures 3 and 4 show that whereas in 2009, references to the Curriculum in the news were spread by only 1 appearance of each of very different issues in nature (being reaction /declaration an exception), in 2013, there was a clearly higher number of references to the Curriculum that had to do with reporting a Government initiative (6) or Reaction / Declaration regarding those initiatives (6).

This can be explained partially by a Government change in Portugal, which led to new curricular policies. In the school year of 2012/2013, the Ministry of Education promoted the proposal of new curricula for Basic Education (1st to 9th grade) in all school subjects. So, some newspapers are not only reporting the publication of legal documents due to this reform but are also being a stage for discussing viewpoints about the principles and adequacy of the new proposed curricula.

Some more information about this discussion can be found in the key ideas of what is covered in the news. In 2009, the key ideas being reported in the news about the Curriculum were diverse and had to do with Teaching Portuguese language abroad (2), Teaching of a Foreign Language (1), Religious education (1), Mathematical illiteracy (1) and School work (1). Table 2 presents a synthesis of the main features of the reported news.



Table 2: News about the Curriculum in 2009.

Nature of issue	Key ideas	Type of text	Author	Involved subjects
NEWSPAPER A				
Legal change	Teaching Portuguese language abroad	News Article	Journalist	Institute of Camões Labor unions
Reaction / Declaration	Mathematical illiteracy	News Article	Journalist	President of the Republic
Reaction / Declaration	Teaching of a Foreign Language	News Article	Journalist	Schools
Feature of Educational System	Religious Education	News Article	Journalist	Church
NEWSPAPER B				
Legal change	Teaching Portuguese language abroad	News Article	Journalist	Institute of Camões
Study report	School work	News Article	Journalist	Experts Students

As shown in Table 2, in 2009 there was not a dominant key idea covered by the newspapers and only 1 key idea was equally reported by both newspapers – Teaching Portuguese language abroad – which had to do with a particular legal change occurring in this period. All the analysed texts were news articles written by journalists reporting decisions and viewpoints of a limited number of subjects per article.

The news of 2013 reported more concentrated key ideas. Nine news concerned the new curricular syllabus of Mathematics, 3 were about the new curricular syllabus of Portuguese Language, and each of the following key ideas were focused on the other 7: Extracurricular Activities in Primary school, Teaching visual literacy, Religious education, School newspapers, Memorization in learning, new curricular program of History and National Plan for Education in Cinema. Table 3 presents a synthesis of the main features of the reported news.

Table 3: News about the Curriculum in 2013.

Nature of issue	Key ideas	Type of text	Author	Involved subjects
NEWSPAPER A				
Reaction / Declaration	New curricular syllabus of Math – Revocation of the existing Math curricular syllabus	News Article	Journalist	Professional associations of teachers Teachers
Reaction / Declaration	New curricular syllabus of Math – Revocation of the existing Math curricular syllabus	News Article	Journalist	Professional associations of teachers Teachers
Reaction / Declaration	New curricular syllabus of Math – Revocation of the existing Math curricular syllabus	Opinion Article	Education expert	Ministry of Education
Government initiative	New curricular syllabus of Math – Revocation of the existing Math curricular syllabus	News Article	Journalist	Professional associations of teachers Courts
Contestation	New curricular syllabus of Math – Revocation of the existing Math curricular syllabus	News Article	Journalist	Professional associations of teachers Carers / Parents
Reaction / Declaration	New curricular syllabus of Math – Revocation of the existing Math curricular syllabus	News Article	Journalist	Professional associations of teachers Ministry of Education
Reaction / Declaration	New curricular syllabus of Math – Opinion of the Association of Teachers of Mathematics	News Article	Journalist	Professional associations of teachers Ministry of Education



Nature of issue	Key ideas	Type of text	Author	Involved subjects
Government initiative	New curricular syllabus of Math – Opposition to the new curricular syllabus of Math	News Article	Journalist	Experts
Legal change	New curricular syllabus of Math – Memorization in learning	News Article	Journalist	Ministry of Education Experts
Consequence of the system	Memorization in learning - defending	Letter to Director	Teacher	Students
Government initiative	New curricular syllabus of Portuguese Language - Revocation of the existing curricular syllabus	News Article	Journalist	Ministry of Education Professional associations of teachers
Legal change	New curricular program of Portuguese Language - Criticisms	Opinion Article	Education expert	Ministry of Education
Legal change	New curricular syllabus of Portuguese Language – Answers to criticisms	Opinion Article	Teacher	Particular case
Reaction / Declaration	New curricular syllabus of History - Criticisms	Opinion Article	Teacher	Ministry of Education Teachers
Government initiative	National Plan for Education in Cinema	News Article	Journalist	Teachers Schools
Government initiative	School newspapers – Inclusion of school newspapers in official websites	News Article	Journalist	General Directorate of Education Students
Feature of Educational System	Teaching visual literacy	Opinion Article	Designer	Particular case
Government initiative	Extracurricular Activities in Primary school	News Article	Journalist	Students Ministry of Education
Study report	Religious education	News Article	Journalist	Civil society Government

Table 3 shows that in 2013 there was clearly a dominant key idea being covered by Newspaper A - New curricular syllabus of Math – Revocation of the existing Math curricular syllabus. Some of the new syllabus in other school subjects were also reported and discussed in the newspapers but with rather less prominence: new curricular syllabus of Portuguese Language (3) and new curricular syllabus of History (1). It can also be observed that the types of texts are more diverse in 2013 (news article, opinion article, letter do director), as well as its authors (journalist, teacher, education expert, designer) and involved subjects. For example, in the case of news reporting the pros and cons of the new curricular syllabus of Mathematics, there is a higher attention of journalists in reporting the viewpoints and reactions of diverse subjects - Ministry of Education, Professional Associations of Teachers, Teachers, Experts, Carers / Parents. One can also observe that not only news articles were published about this key idea but also one opinion article. Also, whilst this reporting process raised the discussion around one of the principles that underlies this new curriculum - encouraging the memorization in learning -, one teacher took advantage of the debate to write a letter to the Director advocating the importance of memorization in learning.

In the case of the 3 analysed news reporting the pros and cons of the new curricular syllabus of Portuguese Language, it must be noticed that they have different authors (journalist, education expert and teacher) that engage in a debate: 1 article is an opinion article with criticisms to the new curricular syllabus and the other one is an opinion article with a reaction to the previous criticisms.

The rest of the news about curricular issues were about isolated Government initiatives (3) in several domains and a feature of educational system (1) which did not raise any debate. An additional text reported the results of an international study on religious education which did not have a follow up coverage in the media nor did it raise any debate.

In any case, it seems clear that the news give much more emphasis to the written curriculum than to the actual taught and learned curriculum.



4 Final remarks

This study has shown that the 2 analysed newspapers give little importance to curricular issues (approximately between 1% and 7% of all the published news about education), which can be an indicator of the limited attention given to curricular issues by the media. However, there was a growth in attention to curricular issues from 2009 to 2013. Clearly this was due to an ongoing legal change in curricular policies in 2013 that led to the publication of new planned curricula and which opened a public debate about the adequacy of the new curricular syllabus. Still, more attention is given to the written or prescribed curriculum than to the taught and learned curriculum.

As Newspaper A has a longer format with higher diversity of types of texts, it allowed an opened debate with greater diversity of viewpoints from different stakeholders. Although the diversity of both authors and involved subjects in the analyzed news has increased from 2009 to 2013, it can still be observed a limited participation of stakeholders that are closely related with schooling issues, namely, teachers, professional associations of teachers and education experts. Still, there seems to be an increased social visibility of curricular issues due to the media, as pointed out before by Freitas (2008). By the other hand, as Newspaper B has an assumed shorter format intended at a quick reading, it doesn't focus curricular issues with the same depth nor it develops different approaches regarding those issues.

One interesting fact to be noticed is that, although the recent Government initiative that triggered the publication of new curricular syllabus for Basic Education (1st to 9th grade) has resulted in changes in all school subjects, there has been a distinctively higher attention to Mathematics, a smaller attention to Portuguese language and one single opinion article about History. All of the other school subjects - Information and Communication Technologies, Visual Education, Technological Education, Natural Sciences, Physics and Chemistry, Geography, English language -, have been ignored in the media.

This circumstance suggests that it would be relevant to conduct a follow up study to detect whether this attention is due to an underlying ideological load of the media in which Mathematics is seen as more important than other subjects, or if public representations of school subjects attribute more importance to Mathematics over other subjects guiding the media's choice of what should be considered a reported news.

Still, a higher attention from the media to curricular issues is recommended, so that an engagement of other members of civil society beyond those related to schooling education could be triggered.

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