LEADERS' VOICES ON CURRICULUM AND CURRICULAR FLEXIBILITY

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Abstract

The responsibilities of teachers as curriculum managers are today a challenge given the curricular flexibility. These challenges stem from the discourse of autonomy and the capacity for collaborative deliberation of teachers, which refers to decisions at the level of educational policy, which can be operated in the transformation of schools oriented to the success and meaningful learning of students. This article aims to present a part of a more comprehensive project entitled "Beliefs, knowledge, and practices of teachers". It analyzes the voice of the leaders of eleven groups of schools of the Intermunicipal Community of Lands of Trás-os-Montes (CIM-TTM), Portugal. The study follows a qualitative methodology, using group interviews with school principals, department coordinators, and class directors as a data collection technique. From the content analysis on the school, category emerged the following subcategories: meanings of curriculum and curriculum management. The data reveal that participants associate the concept of the curriculum with knowledge, disciplinary content, experience, learning, and school. The influence of the hidden curriculum in the teaching and learning process was perceived, and its political connotation and utopian sense. Regarding the management of the curriculum, the teacher emerged in the participant's conceptions as an executor, a builder, and a decision-maker. The curriculum was specifically recognized as guidance and control over compliance with the program. In the context of curricular flexibility, the: (i) the adequacy to specific contexts was emphasized; (ii) the integration of the regional or local component of the curriculum; (iii) hope for curricular flexibility: recognition of potentialities and limitations; and (iv) the discrepancy between design and implementation. In conclusion, it points to the need to respond to the current and future challenges of the school, and to value the curriculum for the creation of opportunities favourable to the success of students.

Keywords: curriculum, curricular flexibility, school leaders.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study reflects part of the project *Beliefs, knowledge, and practices of teachers*, developed under the Integrated and Innovative Plan to Combat School Failure (PIICIE), of the Intermunicipal Community of Terras de Trás-os-Montes (CIM-TTM), Portugal. The analysis refers, specifically, to the voice of the leaders of eleven school groupings integrated into that community on the curriculum. Since teachers and school leaders are perceived as important agents of change in the development of quality education, the questioning of their beliefs, knowledge, and practices, as well as the way they relate to each other, assumes relevance in this study. Regarding only the beliefs of the leaders, some conceptual references that underpin the importance of it to the leadership are considered in the next paragraphs.

According to Tanrıverdi and Apak [1, p. 842] curriculum orientations are "beliefs about what a school curriculum should achieve and how teaching, learning and assessment should occur (be carried out)". Thus, beliefs seem to influence teachers' curriculum orientations with reflections on the decisions they make in their educational practices [2]. In this regard, the beliefs of leaders, whether top or middle, also affect decision-making about the school, the curriculum and assessment. It is therefore important to understand their beliefs, considering that the principal is responsible for the organization, planning and guidance of various activities, whether they are within the scope of the executive director, the pedagogical council or the administrative council and simultaneously be able to develop with the intermediate bodies (class councils, curricular departments, teachers' councils), the cooperative and participative work, with delegated responsibilities, seeking to fulfil in the most efficient way, their management, pedagogical and evaluation functions, to find the best ways to support their decision-making and the promotion of school success.

It is understood that the decision-making process is influenced by philosophical perspectives on education and curriculum, and is fundamental to the teaching profession [3], [4]. Regarding the curriculum, Cheung and Wong point out five orientations [1], [5]–[7]: (i) the curriculum as a cognitive process; (ii) the curriculum as a technology (behavioural); (iii) the curriculum for self-development (humanistic); (iv) the curriculum for social reconstruction and; v) academic. In the words of Roldão, it is important to question the design, both from the perspective of a plan to be fulfilled (technical rationality), and the construction of the curriculum as a participatory and situated project (constructivist logic) [8]. The study of the leaders' beliefs can contribute to uncovering the leaders' perspective on the curriculum, providing a more realistic view of what influences their decision-making, considering its reconstruction.

The recognition of teachers' responsibilities as curriculum managers currently faces several educational challenges [9]–[11], particularly curriculum flexibility [12], [13]. This stems from the discourse of autonomy and teachers' capacity for collaborative deliberation, which refers to decisions at the level of educational policy, which can support the transformation of schools oriented to the success and meaningful learning of students. Managing the curriculum assumes the school as a curricular institution and the teaching profession as the exercise of curricular deliberation [14], [15].

In this study, the polysemy of meanings of the curriculum is recognized in [5]. The differentiated valuation of the curriculum as knowledge, learning and experience in the response to curriculum issues is considered, depending on the underlying curriculum theory and the respective classifications [16]–[19]. The curriculum as a synonym for school is situated about the educational purpose of the school [8]. The curriculum can assume a political connotation [20], [21] even in the dimension of the curriculum as utopian and idealistic, which is oriented towards what "should be". As Roldão states, as a social construction, "the essence of the school curriculum and the existence of the school is the need to respond to a socially recognized need" [22, p. 11], being the programs considered as means, with an instrumental function, to achieve the curricular learning. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on the social, political, and cultural functions of education and in this context, the curriculum plays a key role. In curriculum management, the teacher can assume different roles, as executor and as constructor/manager of the curriculum, considering the articulation of the three levels of curriculum decision: macro, meso and micro [11]. The belief in curricular flexibility is justified as an opportunity to improve students' learning, for which it is essential to optimize its potential [23] and minimize its limitations. The criticism of the school organization remains, which provokes the need to operate a sustained and appropriate change to current and future challenges.

The need to reflect on leadership in education is particularly important since it differs in its characteristics from leadership in other types of organizations or companies.

2 METHODOLOGY

This article seeks to analyse the beliefs of school leaders, the headmaster, department coordinators and class leaders about the curriculum. Considering the characteristics of the study, the qualitative approach was preferred as it is the one that brings together a conceptual basis that supports the operationalization and analysis of the data collected on the issue under study.

For data collection, we used the interview technique and *focus group with* school leaders. They were conducted, and included school directors, coordinators of curriculum departments and class directors, belonging to eleven school clusters in north-eastern Portugal, the sample consists of more than 50% of the target audience.

Interview scripts were produced for data collection. The validation of this instrument was performed according to the stipulated procedures, subjecting it to the scrutiny of nine teachers, researchers, and experts in the educational area. The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed, giving rise to protocols, identified with acronyms (Director of the school cluster A01D... A11D; Curriculum department coordinator A01CT and A11CT; Class/group leader A0Dt... A11Dt). Data were organized and analysed using the content analysis technique. According to Bardin [24, pp. 121–122], content analysis is organized around three chronological cores: "pre-analysis; exposure of the material and treatment of results". In this way, according to the author, the first activity consists of floating reading, which relates to the "contact with the documents to be analysed and getting to know the text, letting yourself be invaded by impressions and orientations" followed by the determination of the categories, based on the data referenced therein. A first coding was performed using aprioristic dimensions and categories (based on the interview script) and defining the unit of analysis as the sentence or set of sentences. The data collected were analysed using the NVivo software.

3   RESULTS

We present the results of content analysis of the interviews conducted with the leaders, in the dimension beliefs and school category, from which emerge the following subcategories: meanings of curriculum and curriculum management.

3.1   Content Analyses

In the category Curriculum, the participants refer to their vision of what they believe the curriculum to be, which is defined in two subcategories of analysis - Meanings of curriculum and Curriculum Management (Table 1).

Table 1. Curriculum category.

Subcategory	Indicators
Meanings of curriculum	Knowledge/learning/experience
	Curriculum and school as synonyms
	Political connotation
	Utopia/idealist
Curriculum management	Role of the teacher
	Curricular flexibility
	Potentialities
	Limitations

The following subsections explain the subcategories.

3.1.1   Meanings of curriculum

It was verified that the participants, when indicating what they believe to be the curriculum, associate this concept with knowledge, disciplinary contents, experience, learning and school, being also perceived the influence of the hidden curriculum in the teaching and learning process, political connotation, and utopian sense.

In the subcategory Meanings of the curriculum, the concept of the curriculum can be associated with knowledge, centred on the disciplinary contents. The participants mentioned that "Right now we have the subjects, which I think are fundamental, which are completely turned to the theory" (A06Dt); "contents are very important" (A10CT). The participants also indicate that the curriculum consists of experience and knowledge: "Experience and organisation of knowledge" (A11Dt). They also refer to the importance of knowledge and skills, by stating that the curriculum "will be the set of knowledge and skills that are designed in the light of the student's profile and the essential competencies, also taking into account the articulation with the National Strategy of Education for Citizenship" (A02D).

In another perspective, the curriculum can be associated with the daily experience, and, in this sense, it is "everything you acquire. What you work on day to day" (A11Dt). In the context of preschool education, the idea of a curriculum focused on children's learning, and which should intentionally start from their interests stands out, explaining that "by taking the child's interest [it is possible] to develop all the objectives of preschool education, at the level of contents, to make the learning within the contents of the curriculum guidelines more by the child's interest" (A04CT).

The valuing of learning is described in statements such as "the curriculum can be the design of learning that the student does inside the school" (A11CT), emphasising the achievement of learning considered relevant and useful for his/her life: "each of us should have as fundamental the learning that is useful for us, it is not very interesting to acquire vague concepts, national or international concepts, when afterwards we do not know why things happen and it does not lead us anywhere" (A03D).

Participants state that "the programme is the same as when I started working. So, we intend to change, but it is there behind that which is holding us back, too, a little bit..." (A08CT). Following the programmes, there is also a reference to the textbooks, stating that there is also "no coordination between the textbooks and the curriculum" (A08D). In the discourses of the participants, it is possible to perceive the understanding of the programme to achieve the learning, in the same sense pointed out by Roldão [22].

The recognition of the existence of the hidden curriculum as a factor influencing the teaching-learning process is also present in the participants' speeches: "the curriculum, which is hidden, which is not visible, but which is also present in the various domains" (A11CT); "In addition to the formal curriculum, which is our orientation for our more formal practice, therefore, the hidden curriculum is extremely important to me. These are those learnings which we develop without being formal, but which are very important for our lives" (A11CT).

For some participants, the curriculum is synonymous with school: "The curriculum is exactly..., the curriculum is the school. Everything that happens at school, everything that constitutes significant learning, positive or negative... is the curriculum" (A11D).

The curriculum is intrinsically linked to political, ideological, moral, historical, pedagogical, and financial factors, among others, which influence the decisions taken in the contexts and the educational and social reality. According to the participants' speeches, the curriculum assumes a political connotation, which can be understood as "the political part in education... a comprehensive curriculum for all..." (A08CT). In this conceptualisation, it is mentioned that "the curriculum is what the authority believes is necessary for the development of our society, establishing this set of learning, this set of contents that [students] have to acquire" (A11CT). This political dimension is present in the discourses: "any government regarding any theme it wants to address, if it wants to address an issue related to racism, to liberties, it will introduce these themes in the programmes so that the teachers can work and develop citizenship in a complete way" (A11CT), showing that it can even be "an instrument that serves for this social reproduction (...) and in a certain way also an opportunist and political imposition" (A11Dt).

There is also the idea that the construction of the curriculum reflects the pressures from the social partners, as it is mentioned that "there are subjects that are abusing the curricula, (...) and, then, they want to put everything in there and, when you say 'I have to take something out, nobody wants to give up what they want to take out" (A06D).

One participant also mentioned that the curriculum "is a utopia" (A07Dt), possibly because of its demands, and that the project of citizens and student-designed therein is not in line with the reality experienced in schools today.

Based on the evidence exposed, it is stated that the participants reveal the complexity of what is understood by the curriculum [16]–[20], [25], evidencing the polysemy of the concept [8], [15], [23].

3.1.2 Curriculum management

As for the management of the curriculum, the teacher emerged as an executor, a builder, and a decision-maker of the curriculum. The curriculum was specifically recognised as guidance and control over the fulfilment of the programme. In the context of curriculum flexibility, it was emphasized: (i) the adequacy to specific contexts; (ii) the integration of the regional or local component of the curriculum; (iii) the hope about curriculum flexibility: recognition of potentialities and limitations; and (iv) the discrepancy between the design and its implementation.

In the subcategory Curriculum management, the participants refer to the teacher's role as executor, builder, and decision-maker. The participants assume that the curriculum "is the guiding document of teaching practices" (A08CT), having a function of guidance, "for the teacher to work, for the disciplinary group to work, for the department to work and guide their students in the way they think is more correct or better for learning" (A08D). This idea is further evidenced in statements such as "the curriculum for me is just a guideline of what the teacher can do with their students. It is an orientation that has to be followed, that is why it exists, otherwise, each one would do whatever they wanted within their area" (A08D).

There are different opinions about the role of the teacher in the different levels of education. In pre-school education it is assumed that the educator is the manager of the curriculum, in the sense stated in the Curricular Guidelines for Pre-School Education - OCEPE [26] and that this way of operationalizing the curriculum makes the kindergarten educators "benefited in the curriculum aspect, because [they] can create [their] curriculum" (A06CT). It is stated that "regarding the curriculum... for us, it is learning experiences, where we just have some curriculum guidelines in the various subject areas and the curriculum is built by us and by our children, according to their interests and what they want to learn..." (A10Dt).

At other educational levels, participants refer to internal control over programme compliance. The curriculum is a guideline, and the programme is an instrument. Some discourses consider these concepts as synonyms, although in a restricted sense. Although they can manage the curriculum, they have "the freedom to work the contents in the way they want, what is certain is that they have to justify their decisions, having "to comply with them... because if they don't comply, they have to justify why

they didn't comply" (A10Dt). It is evident in the participants' speeches the inheritance of the weight of programme compliance [15], [27].

This control over compliance with the syllabus enables teachers' work to be evaluated and they consider that it is "through the curriculum (...) they can assess whether they are working well or not. Because the curriculum is national (...) we can be flexible. We have our proximity and discipline in multidisciplinary and we can assess whether we are working within the parameters, whether we are working well or not" (A04Dt).

Some say that the way to operationalise the curriculum is to "follow the textbooks", "because it happens that if you don't follow the textbooks, [they will] ask why the teacher hardly gives any texts from the textbook... What does the teacher then do in class" (A10Dt). In this sense, it is assumed that there is also some form of control of parents towards the teachers. This idea is further reinforced when it is stated that "I don't know if the students and the parents themselves are very keen on big changes to the curriculum or if they prefer the curriculum to be the same for everybody, don't they? I don't know what the confusion would be if they knew that one pupil was dealing with one subject and next to another class another one... they are not very open there... I have had that experience that there are big differences in dealing with subjects from one class or school to another..." (A08D).

It is also worth mentioning the need to comply with the syllabus since students are called to take tests, being subjected to assessment at examination times and entry into higher education, and there is "a national level syllabus, which we have to comply with and that forces us to move at that pace, because if we do not comply, those students whose perspective is to continue their studies in higher education" (A06Dt) may be disappointed in their expectations.

As evidenced in the speeches, the participants refer to the decision-making process about the curriculum at different levels [12] and the way it can be operationalized. Beliefs can influence what teachers think and decide about the curriculum, namely at the level of their practices. In addition to being implementers, teachers should be constructors of the curriculum [13, 14, 15].

Within the scope of curriculum management, teachers also indicate curriculum flexibility, in speeches that refer for example to the regional or local component of the curriculum, mentioning that "there should be two types of curricula: the national curriculum and the regional, or local curriculum. And I would say that 50% of this curriculum could be on the national level and the other 50% subdivided into local and regional" (A03D).

This idea is evident in statements referring to territorialisation, i.e., the adaptation of the curriculum to the specific context, stating that "the curriculum is a guideline that should then be adapted to the reality of the school and within the school to the reality of the class" (A04CT). In this sense, they also mentioned that "we should be able to define a curriculum according to the added values and potentialities of our region (...), the curriculum has to be built this way and only then autonomy and curricular flexibility can enter" (A11D).

Curricular flexibility is not a new idea in national education policy. The need for flexibility is recognised as a necessity when "There is content, there are ideas, there is history that [should] be maintained, that should be compulsorily worked on. However, it should be a little more flexible, not with the flexibility that is spoken of today, but flexible according to the interests and experiences of our students. I also think that they should be appropriate to the country and the area and not be so rigid throughout the year or the various years of schooling. In short, I think there should be a curriculum, yes, but it should be flexible according to the context in which it is taught" (A05D).

The relevance of the "flexibility of the contents" (A10CT) is also considered, which will currently be possible thanks to the legislative framework and the articulation of various curriculum documents, stating that "We have extremely important documents, we have the 54, we have the 55, in the 54 all those measures are universal, and all the others are additional, selective. And then we have documents that are also structuring that come from the supervising authority and that also somehow enter the issue of flexibility. The profile of the student at the end of each cycle or if we want to leave basic education is important and we must respect it. And after the essential learning on how are we going to hide all these issues can go to the flexibility and then we have some DACs that many people talk about in all schools of curricular autonomy, but can be interesting tools to carry out that methodology that many people favour in schools that is project methodology, and I think it serves as a glove to address the issue of DACs" (A10CT).

Some speeches reveal the participants' hope about curricular flexibility by stating that "it might have advantages because there are things that are specific in a certain context" (A09D), and that it stems from the "need to intervene at the level of the curriculum (...) to improve something and, therefore, we

saw in this tool something that we could come to work with and that could have a very positive effect in terms of the life of the school and the work that we were developing here" (A04D).

Also in this line, the participants mentioned that "the issue of the curriculum and the flexibility of the curriculum are linked, and not only in name. I think that the flexibility of the curriculum answers some of the problems that the curriculum can cause. The curriculum can, in some way, condition, or confine, if you like, what happens in the classroom" (A10D).

The idea of openness and the possibility of adaptation emerges "at the level of each of the schools and each of the classes, not [being] the curriculum prescribed by the Ministry of Education that matters in this case but reflecting the adaptation that we make of the curriculum. But it must be comprehensive" (A08D) and "in that perspective, we like this perspective of the open curriculum very much, at least in a certain percentage" (A04D), considering that it opens the possibility of "adapting the curriculum, or the contents to today's needs, to current times" (A06Dt). The belief in curriculum flexibility may even mobilise the involvement of students, the school and society itself, constituting a reference at the local, regional and national levels, since it is believed that flexibility may be a way of adapting to a reality that we have in the locality or even at another level, looking at the example of other countries, at the regional level, these are issues with another dimension and by having another dimension we gain other things. This curricular flexibility would allow us to look at each school, and each environment and adapt some things to our context. I don't know if this is the way to go, but what I want to believe is that there are other references and that curricular flexibility could also be a regional or local reference, but that society feels it, is committed to it and that the students themselves also look at it as something that adds something, something that can influence them and that ends up motivating them and giving importance to the school, supported by this flexibility. We try to arrange a symbiosis between the students and the school so that we can walk supported by this flexibility (A09D).

After their analysis, the speeches emphasised curricular flexibility [23], [27], but, on the other hand, some participants show disbelief or at least some disappointment, stating that "flexibility is important (...), but deep down I think we are not getting to the core we want, I think everything is a bit on the way" (A10CT), also revealing the concern that "curricular flexibility becomes curricular ease" (A10CT).

A very particular case concerns special education. It is noteworthy that the valorisation of the student's individuality is visible in special education: "the curriculum we have to do individually, it is per student. So, we take, now with this new legislation, we take the RTP and see what the needs are, the areas where the student has more gaps, in writing, in reading and make the curriculum based on the student's difficulties" (A06CT).

Also, about the management of the curriculum, the participants indicated some potentialities in various domains, namely that there is "a trunk which will be a common trunk for the whole country, but then it is from the curriculum that we will work with the essential learning, the criteria and everything else" (A04CT). Regarding flexibility, the potentialities related to openness and the possibility of valuing local components are indicated, referring, to the fact that "there were extremely rigid national curricula where we could practically not intervene, closed curricula, and the idea of being able to be flexible, to value local components was very attractive to us, right from the beginning" (A04D).

The speeches also mentioned potentialities regarding the curriculum guidelines for pre-school education, stating "that we are very well because it gives us room to work on what we like, what the children like" (A06CT). The opportunity to manage the curriculum is also recognised at other levels of education, by emphasising that "one of the things we managed to do is that for the same purpose we managed to go by other means or other paths" (A08D).

In another sense, the participants question the purpose of the curriculum at the end of compulsory education, "in curricular terms (...) is their continuity, is there an integration of knowledge, of know-how, an integration with competencies, goals? At the end of his schooling is the student prepared, does he have the necessary tools in terms of competitiveness on leaving school? Is the student prepared to go out into the social environment, to be useful to society and for society to repay him/her?" (A10CT).

In this line of thought, some speeches indicate that "the curriculum was progressive in the past and it was more difficult because compulsory schooling was until the 9th grade. Today we have compulsory schooling until the 12th grade, so we must treat the curriculum with greater demand in a more phased way, so that the students learn and understand it, not as a task that is assessed at the end of the year and that the following year, they no longer know anything. But that they understand that it is necessary, it is useful for later in their active life and if this is not done, there is no continuity" (A06CT).

The need to value a practical, career-oriented curriculum is also affirmed, namely, "more and more curricula should be geared, in a way, towards a more professional, more practical aspect" (A03D).

Interdisciplinarity can be understood as a potentiality arising from the management of the curriculum. However, it becomes difficult to achieve, revealing that "perhaps some of the situations could be in the more interconnected work between various subjects" (A11Dt), since "all subjects are important and, managing this, is very complicated" (A07Dt).

As limitations of curriculum management, participants mention the length, which makes "the curriculum of the third cycle (...) extremely heavy" (A11Dt) and that "this curriculum is so tight that they don't let them have time for this (...)" (A06D). The "curriculum is very heavy, very heavy" (A06D), for which it is considered that "the curricula have to be slimmed down, they have too much "fat" (A06Dt), "they are too long" (A10D). It is specified that "mainly in terms of length, it is in fact in mathematics that one notices that they are more extensive, and the mismatch is also greater at the level of mathematics" (A06CT).

One of the reasons given for the excessive weight of the programmes is related to the influence of the professional associations in the different subject areas: "you are constantly saying this, but get another strategy, get other strategies and the answer is, but the curriculum is huge. But then talk to your associations that reduce it to the curriculum" (A06D).

Participants note that there is a mismatch of programmes, stating that "students don't have to go all the way to the twelfth to learn the same thing." (A10CT), stressing that "our education system, compared to other countries, is completely outdated" (A10CT). It is "a script, but inappropriate to our reality, to the reality of our students" (A07Dt).

This mismatch is also observed in the developmental and age level mismatch of the students, specifying that "the error is there between the 4th year of schooling and the 5th year of schooling, for me, but I haven't done any study, empirically I see that the problem is there. Most of those kids are too young to understand what the mathematics experts think they should understand" (A06D); "I'm from the 1st CEB. It's like this, what my colleagues say, for 7 years I'm not so into the curriculum, I think our curricula, especially the mathematics one is above, I mean there is a lot of abstraction and 2nd-year kids doing for example fractions is not adequate. Our curriculum is not adequate to the age level, because more and more children are coming to our schools" (A06CT).

Some discourses reveal that the programmes are "overloaded, excessively so even for the age level, for the maturity of the ideas of the kids we have" (A11Dt), which makes them "very demanding for the age group of the 1st cycle" (A06CT).

Despite the mismatch, the participants recognise the effort to make the curriculum more suitable to current demands, assuming that "a school divided from top to bottom, in which the teacher tells the story, and the student memorises, these programmes could be suitable, they are not suitable for today's school in which there is no such telling and there cannot be, the student has to be led to discover. The ministry is aware of this, and they made several adjustments to the syllabus, with the essential learning" (A04D).

The participants consider that the need to comply with the syllabus highlights the lack of freedom in curriculum management, stating that "we are very attached... we are too attached to the curriculum and even to textbooks... but it's also like this... they don't give us any choice, we don't have freedom... because we must justify... We get to the end of the year... if I want to make any changes... I simply can't... I must justify a content that I, for example, haven't covered..." (A10Dt).

The official curriculum is compulsory, "(...), that is, what the students have to learn, already stipulated by the tutelage, the subjects, the time load, (...) the teaching terms that are assigned to each of the subjects" (A11Dt). The official curriculum becomes prescriptive by limiting the teachers' freedom of decision, considering that "the curriculum is imposed, it is established by who has the legitimacy to do it, which is the political power" (A07CT). This makes it a "top-down" orientation (A04CT), which "works almost like a straitjacket" (A04CT). It is "an orientation, imposition, which sometimes limits us... takes away a certain freedom, (...)" (A11Dt), being that "sometimes it has a little bit of a castrating factor because it imposes" (A11Dt). It makes the participants feel "obliged to comply with that programme..." but they recognise that they can guide it because "the curriculum is an orientation in terms of contents...", but "because they demand it... and I don't have freedom" (A10Dt). On the one hand, the participants recognise the need for a guiding matrix, by stating that "I agree that, yes sir, some things that have to be the same for everyone, but if we want an alternative curriculum, we can't be saying that the curriculum should be the same for the whole country" (A08CT). On the other hand, this orientation may not be so prescriptive since it is necessary to "appropriate this curriculum and this profile and from there develop the activity according to this goal that I want to achieve, which is based on some elements, but which

should not be as restrictive as they are... The curriculum restricts a lot in this aspect, but I think there should be a matrix there, a basis, perhaps not so restrictive... " (A08CT).

Some participants take a critical stance towards curriculum flexibility, stating that "the curriculum is too extensive, it should be reduced, and there should be no compulsory compliance with the curriculum, and they may say, but there is no longer, with this curricular flexibility thing, which is not true because then we have the national exams because they are the ones that matter" (A06D).

This idea is corroborated in other speeches that highlight that "making the curriculum more flexible at some levels of education, only if I'm interpreting this very wrong, is impossible. It is not possible because if we are talking about secondary education national examinations, I can do very innovative strategies and I can even do anything and everything, but I cannot escape the contents of the curriculum. I can effectively develop skills and abilities that they will need to interpret the contents of the curriculum and discover different ways. Now I can't run away from the curriculum, make the curriculum more flexible to decide what I think is best for that class and the contents that I think fit that class, I can't do that, unless I'm seeing this all wrong" (A08D).

Regarding curricular flexibility, participants refer to the discrepancy between the design and its implementation, considering that "the idea is good, the practice of the idea is not good because it seems that we are in the pedagogical dividing sweets" (A06D).

The critical attitude about curriculum flexibility has repercussions on the organisation of the school and is evident in speeches such as, "This is another issue where flexibility comes up against. The student wants German... there are only four students, he can't. The student wants arts or something else... he cannot choose because there are few students and, therefore, the new subjects do not open because there are not enough students, regardless of whether the school has a teacher to teach that subject. There may be a teacher in the school, but because there are not 15 students, they cannot open. There is no flexibility, no autonomy at all..." (A08CT).

The critical attitude towards curricula also extends to the organisation of the school: "We still have obsolete curricula, obsolete textbooks... we still have a school model organised, maybe, in a curricular way in terms of departments, where people articulate very little knowledge... and look at the students as a set of grades" (A10Dt).

Curriculum flexibility is linked to the discourse of school autonomy, which requires teachers to have a decision-making power that is not always assumed, stating that: "we spend our whole lives asking for more autonomy, but when in the la they give it then we don't want it because we constantly hear, this should be a national curriculum and there's no flexibilization here or anything" (A06D); "regarding the first cycle (...) many times the teachers themselves are not attached, it's not attached to the curriculum... they are attached to their way of doing... because many times you are essentially attached to the program... The syllabus ruins everything for you..." (A10Dt).

The intentionality of the curriculum is associated with the purpose of the school. In this sense, the school and the curriculum should correspond to the educational needs of society, stating that "the curriculum now, most of them are out of step with what the current school should be. However, I'm not one of those people who thinks it should be completely eradicated" (A05D).

In this context, it is emphasised that citizenship issues assume a particular interest, considering that "citizenship, which was a curricular component, was a subject in secondary education, at a project level, I'm sorry that then it disappeared because I think it was a step backwards, and we have to always combine success with citizenship" (A04D).

Beliefs play an important role in schooling and appear to influence teachers' orientations about the curriculum [26], affecting their decisions about teaching practices.

4   CONCLUSIONS

This article explains the voices of the leaders of eleven school groupings of the CIM-TTM, in Portugal, to know their beliefs about the school, in the context of the curriculum and curricular flexibility. In summary, we highlight the main conclusions:

Regarding the *meanings of curriculum,* the leaders associate it with knowledge, subject content, experience, learning and school. The influence of the hidden curriculum on the teaching and learning process is highlighted, affirming its political connotation and its utopian sense.

In *curriculum management, the* teacher is understood as the executor, builder, and decision-maker of the curriculum. And it is assumed the curriculum line is guidance and control over the fulfilment of the program.

In the context of curricular flexibility, its importance is highlighted for its suitability to specific contexts, the integration of the regional or local component of the curriculum and the hope of curricular flexibility. Its potential and some limitations are recognized, also highlighting the discrepancy between its conception and its implementation.

Within the scope of curricular flexibility, the valorisation of the individuality of the student *is* also highlighted, focusing above all on special education.

The data highlights the questioning regarding the purpose of the curriculum and the value of the practical, career-oriented component.

There is also some criticism of the length, the excessive weight, and the inadequacy of the programmes. and the prescriptive curriculum, which limits teachers' freedom of decision, despite the effort to adapt it to current demands and needs.

It points to the need to respond to the school's current and future challenges, in the sense of enhancing the curriculum to create opportunities for students' success.

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