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Educational Policies and the Quality of Teaching: Perceptions of Portuguese Teachers

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Abstract

The educational and curricular policies of the last two decades reflect attention to the quality of teaching by associating it with educational success, the improvement of student learning and the professional development of teachers. In this article we present some of the results of an investigation carried out with Portuguese teachers from the first cycle of basic education, who had, as their main objective, the understanding of the impact of educational and curricular policies on the development and identity of teachers, as well on the quality of teaching. We took as references various legal documents, especially the new Statute for a Teaching Career (STC) and the Evaluation of Teacher Performance (ETP) and other programs implemented by the Portuguese Ministry of Education. This longitudinal study was carried out over three years and it adopted a methodology of both a qualitative and quantitative nature, which permitted us to understand the perceptions of teachers of the first cycle of basic education using: 1) written and oral biographical narratives; 2) discussion groups formed specially for the purpose; and 3) replies from 249 questionnaires returned by teachers of this cycle. In this text we will report the results of analyzing the replies from the questionnaires and the statistical analysis made with the Chi-squared Test and the T-Test, which corroborate other studies carried out, particularly at an international level and which reveal that the teachers felt that the educational policies interfered negatively with their work, thus provoking: a weakening of their professional relationships, interaction with their peers and their collaborative work, as well as professional demotivation and disinvestment with a resulting negative impact on the quality of their teaching.

Keywords

Educational Policies, Teaching Work, Quality of Teaching

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1. Introduction

One of the present objectives of Portuguese educational policies is the raising of basic competencies, as well as the training and qualification levels of the Portuguese particularly through the expansion of opportunities for young people and adults to obtain qualifications, the promotion of an improvement in the quality of student learning and the enhancement of the work of the teaching profession. In the same way that the European level developed successive programs (*Education and Training 2010*, *Education and Training 2015* and *Education and Training 2020*) destined to strengthen the efficiency of educational systems, which should progressively result in better learning result. Membership of these programs brought Portugal new challenges in the search for appropriate responses to the commitments adopted at the national and European levels.

One can point out that the progress realized with these programs appears to indicate a general improvement of the national education and training systems, specifically in the domains of lifelong learning and in the acquisition of essential competencies at all levels of teaching. However, the official communication published at the end of November 2009 by the European Commission pointed out that it is likely to be a slow process that will present some weaknesses in the solution of educational problems including the early abandonment of schooling and the improvement of the learning. This, therefore, reinforced the necessity of investing even more in education and training systems regardless of the economic and social recession that has been happening in Europe.

The program “*Education and Training 2015*”, which is currently in force in Portuguese schools, suggests—among other procedures—the involvement of the teachers in this process, as a guarantee of the quality of teaching.

Since 2007 in Portugal, policies and practices for evaluating teacher performance that raise demanding challenges for teachers have been implemented. These policies have had consequences for their work, particularly in their involvement and personal investment, as various authors highlighted (Alves-Pinto, 2008; Goodson, 2008; Formosinho & Machado, 2010; Herdeiro & Silva, 2013). This text will give an account of how the educational and curricular policies adopted have interfered negatively in teaching work, in particular in the weakening of professional relationships and interactions and collaborative work, as well as professional demotivation and disinvestment with its corresponding negative impact on the quality of teaching.

2. Educational and Curricular Policies: The Guidance from Europe

The conception and implementation of educational policies are circumscribed by a globally structured agenda and the national priorities identified are decisively conditioned by global politico-economic dynamics and relationships.

In this way with respect to educational guidance, Europe has been preoccupied in drawing up a common general approach for the resolution of problems emerging from the evolution of society, such as education for all, the inclusive school, the extension of the school network, lifelong learning, amongst other aspirations.

From this moment in which the more developed countries, in general, can claim to have attained the main objective of universal compulsory schooling, there are numerous world-wide reports produced by UNESCO (1996, 1998, 2000, 2005, among others) that offer us a range of viewpoints about the different questions and perspectives inherent in the difficulties involving present education, thus underlining the necessity of investing in the quality of teachers and their institutions.

The term quality is the fulcrum of the new paradigm of sustainable education, as it represents the baseline of all of the initiatives that have been initiated or strengthened. The investment in the quality of schools and teachers is considered to be the base from which to drive developments, thus creating, in this way, new responsibilities within educational system (Herdeiro & Silva, 2013).

Kelchtermans (2009: p. 63) claims that “during the last few decades, education and teaching have fallen under the enchantment of performance-oriented activity”. This means that schools and teachers have to have a good performance, have to justify the investment made in education and so serve as a measurement of productivity or profit and as evidence of quality.

The European Union in a series of directions called “The Lisbon Strategy” stimulated and stressed discussion of the problem of training and professional development, by proposing new configurations and an increased relevance essentially in the educational world (Canário, 2007). Challenging recommendations about teachers were discussed and shared, whereby the leadership took on a fundamental role: the revitalization of collaborative cultures; the creation of learning communities in schools; the building up of a new vision of the teacher, as a

comprehensive professional; and the implementation of reflective practices in school contexts.

In fact, the directions recommended by the European Union took on a primary role, especially when it recommended educational changes in which teachers are considered crucial and decisive agents in this process.

3. The Quality of Teaching and Teachers: Perspectives and Challenges

The most recent political discourses in the educational field, both internationally and national, have accentuated the necessity of educational quality in response to a teaching of “excellence”.

For Darling-Hammond (2010: p. 201), the quality of teaching “is associated to a substantial teaching, which permits the learning of a wide diversity of students and which meets the demands of the subject, the learning objectives and the needs of the students in a particular context”.

In 1992, in the OCDE Report about *Schools and quality*, it was written that it is unanimously known that the competency and dedication of the teaching force are the condition *sine qua non* of quality teaching, which is independent of the teaching and learning conditions.

The quality of the teachers, besides being a dimension of quality teaching, can be defined as “a mix of personal characteristics, competencies and ways of understanding that an individual brings to teaching, including certain specific predispositions in terms of behavior” (Monteiro, 2008: p. 200). The author, by relating the quality of education with the quality of teachers argues that in education it is not possible to have professional quality without personal qualities. To this perception can be added that recently there continues “to be the more sensitive, distressing and, therefore, more neglected dimension of professionalization in education” (Monteiro, 2008: p. 37).

Marchesi and Martín (2003) emphasize *the commitment* of the teacher with (his/her) work as being a characteristic that makes possible the amazing qualities, which “are intimately related with professional fulfillment, with his/her morale, with motivation and with identity” (Day, 2004: p. 100).

The *affection of the students* is another characteristic that contributes to a positive attitude in relation to learning, as well as patience, perseverance, helping with the self-esteem of the students and a sense of humor, which are also pointed out when there exists a relationship of respect for and empathy with the students.

The *scientific and didactic knowledge* of the subject to be taught is another characteristic that distinguishes the good teachers—they have the capacities, for example, selecting the more relevant concepts or information and making it simpler for learning by the students. Furthermore, they must possess an adaptable knowledge that allows them to formulate judgments about what will be the result in a certain context in relation to the needs of the students.

The quality of the teacher is not limited by the acquisition and employment of this knowledge in the teaching of a specific subject, *the domination of numerous ways of teaching and learning* is also a fundamental element. A good teacher is one that makes use of various ways of teaching that lead to the adoption of “different perspectives of what he/she comes across in traditional teaching, (...) so that the students could learn in the most efficient way” (Day, 2004: p. 125). Hopkins and Stern (1996) include among a set of characteristics, which determine teacher quality, flexibility, the capacity of the teacher to combine the individual work of the student with group work and his/her astuteness for solving unexpected situations.

Among these attributes that describe teaching work, *reflection, the sharing of experiences and team work* assume a prominent place, as conditions for quality teaching.

In another investigation that we carried out with teachers from the First Cycle of Basic Education (Herdeiro, 2007) we concluded that the dynamic of the participant teachers in reflective practices, as well as their investment in this process and the professional postures adopted—being critical, being dedicated, being responsible and being autonomous—stimulated *the birth of a different teacher*. It is in this reflective dynamic and in a school context that the teacher learns to construct and to transform his/her professional knowledge, promotes significant professional moments and motivators for experimentation, taking decisions and solving day-today problems.

Nevertheless, teachers and schools are not isolated from the policies developed by educational administrations. Immediately, the quality of teachers depends on the individual teacher, the school in which he/she teaches and the specific educational policy.

According to Darling-Hammond (2010: p. 202), the consistency of teacher quality can increase the probability of a consistent quality of teaching but it does not guarantee it, as it only adds “that the initiatives that aim to

develop the quality of teaching must consider not only the means for identifying, rewarding and using the competences and capacity of teachers but also for developing teaching contexts that are liable to allow good practices on the part of the teachers”.

Out another way, when educational policies are driven solely by economic criteria and stimulated by international financial institutions, they can endanger the quality of education, specifically in the matter of training and professional development, which will have consequences for student learning.

4. Methodology: Participants, Materials and Procedure

This study aimed to learn about the impact of the recent laws on teacher professional development and to examine the factors that inhibit the quality of teaching.

The participants were 249 elementary school teachers with a predominance of women (80.7%). In terms of age they were mainly in the 31 to 40 age group (39.0%) and in the 41 to 50 group (30.5%). A large proportion of the teachers (48.2%) were in an insecure professional situation, because they were still under contract.

The authors chose to combine quantitative and qualitative research approaches, when researching for this study. The qualitative approach involved the collection of biographical narratives from the elementary school teachers. This provided the study with valuable individual meanings, which—after comparison—enabled the authors to move from the particular to the general. A questionnaire was designed with closed questions, open questions and Likert scales and it was based on the outcomes of the narratives, the legislation and a literature review.

The collected data were processed and analyzed with the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program, version 17.0.

5. Results

5.1. Absence of Professional Recognition and Demotivation

Establishing a relationship between the relevance of professional recognition and the current legislation in Portugal, namely, the new Statute for a Teaching Career (STC) and the exemplary Evaluation of Teacher Performance (ETP), which promote and reward professional merit expressed in terms of “Very Good” and “Excellent”, on the one side, as a form of recognition of the professional investment of teachers in the profession, while, on the other side, limiting progression in the career, since we perceived that teachers are faced with a higher degree of difficulty in deciding which path to take to obtain due professional recognition. Right away, the teachers felt themselves confined to two options. If they are motivated by what is valued in the legislation, they seek personal merit and become individualists, competitive and indifferent to the motivations of their equals, which causes a troubled atmosphere in the school. If they decide to adopt a professional posture endowed with effort, determination and responsibility towards their colleagues, they are confronted with insensitivity and the absence of recognition of their work by their hierarchical superiors and the rest of the educational community, so and they become demotivated. Both possibilities require higher levels of energy and investment, as they are simultaneously discouraging for the teachers and have an impact on teaching work and the school institution. In the end the teachers feel themselves deprived of professional recognition and progression in their career, which is reflected in professional development and in the (re)construction of their professional identity.

In the responses to the questionnaire distributed the teachers, when asked about their motivation and satisfaction in their work in view of the legislative policy implemented in their country, mentioned that it is extremely important for them to feel motivated in their job (96.0%). In **Table 1**, they recognized that the recent legislation (STC and ETP) interfered negatively in their professional motivation (62.6%), hampered their professional development in school (95.5%) and compromised the quality of their teaching practices in the school context.

The teachers highlighted factors both internal and external to school that interfered in a negative way with their personal and professional development, thus provoking reactions of frustration, tiredness and fear.

Table 2 summarizes the internal and external factors identified by the respondents.

From an analysis of the table, we can establish that the indicators of demotivation emerged from the excessive demands and impositions that are located in two areas: internal and external to the school. The recent educational and curricular policies, which are out of place with the educational contexts, were generators of professional dissatisfaction and demotivation, which were worsened by the progressive aggravation about remuneration and promotion in their career, thus tending to impact on the identity of teachers.

Table 1. The demotivation of teachers concerning professional development.

Indicators	Positive	Negative	CTS
Is stimulation of teacher motivation is important?	96.0	4.0	210.6***
Are you motivated now?	37.4	62.6	15.6***
Do you feel that the new Statute of the Teacher Career and evaluation of performance stimulates your professional development?	4.5	95.5	204.0***

Note: *** $p < 0.001$ and CST = Chi-Squared Test.

Table 2. Factors of professional demotivation internal and external to the school.

	Internal factors (in the school)	External factors (outside the school)
Professional demotivation in school	Working conditions “(...) reduce the number of students per class, without any doubt, more support teachers (...)”. (Sónia, oral narrative, 2010).	Education policies “(...) the policies promote disinvestment in the pedagogical practice of teachers, which irredeemably will be reflected in quality (...)” (Gabriela, written narrative, 2008).
	Work environment “(...) creating great instability, insecurity, discontentment, frustration and demotivation amongst teachers (...)” (Catarina, written narrative, 2008).	Bureaucratic education system “In relation to this documentation all of us are challenged. Unhappily for me, it causes much confusion (...)” (Cátia, discussion group 1).
	Professional recognition “(...) I don’t feel any recognition concerning my work, when doing the best that I know, which makes me give up.” (Questionnaire 129).	Social recognition “(...) the teacher is not recognized on a social level. Our profession was discredited and little recognized. Our work has been of little value” (Questionnaire 55).
	Relationship with peers “There arise new relationships between teachers but one is very confused on the basis of mistrust and demotivation” (Catarina, written narrative, 2008).	Permanent demands of new tasks “(...) I didn’t take a course for, for evaluating teachers. I didn’t take a course for running meetings. I didn’t take a course writing minutes (...)” (Gabriela, oral narrative, 2010).
Consequences/impact on teachers: Frustration, Tiredness, Stress, Fear		

5.2. Teaching Work and Professional Disillusion

Since 2007, with the dissemination of a series of legislative documents called “stimulating good work” about the quality of teaching work, the teachers—being pressured externally and internally—tried to resist the breakdown of the existing order in educational contexts by referring, essentially, to their self-esteem and good professional relationships. The last few years have not been easy for Portuguese teachers due to the professional uneasiness in schools. This has been fundamentally caused by the legal requirement that regulates the evaluation of teacher performance, which in its turn is associated with the economic crisis in Europe and which has impacted on the working environment.

With the absence of team work, or better still, of a common collective project, the social assertion of teachers remains difficult, which has given occasion to a set of destructive criticisms on the part of society in general. These criticisms degrade the professional image and they limit the professional investment of the teachers in their work context. In **Table 3**, the results obtained using the Chi-Squared Test show that, in the area of professional investment, teachers are almost unanimous in highlighting the relevance of continuous training (96.8%) and self-training (98.0%) for the enrichment of their professional performance in school. However, teachers played down their involvement in educational projects (90.4%), because they understood that they spent much time in the construction, monitoring and evaluation of such projects, which practically made them forget the main intentions: to implement new methodologies in the classroom, that is to say, the application of appropriate strategies for student learning.

Notwithstanding the professional complexities that influence their motivation for their practice of teaching, the teachers felt that they must continue to invest in their profession (83.1%), as they liked to be a teacher and, consequently, they felt that they must “do everything” for their students.

For the teachers, different models of continuous training play an important role in the maintenance of feeling and being a professional teacher. Yet, besides continuous training, teachers considered that the promotion of self-training is fundamental, because critical reflection about pedagogical practice provided them with the means

Table 3. Perceptions of teachers in relation to professional investement.

Indicators	Positive	Negative	CTS
It is important to attends continuous training activities	96.8	3.2	218.0***
Teachers should provide moments of self-training	98.0	2.0	229.4***
Opportunities for professional development should be provided in school/school group	96.4	3.6	214.3***
The existence of positive experiences enriches professional development	98.4	1.6	233.2***
Teachers are reducing investment in their profession	16.9	83.1	109.3***
There is investment by school management in continuing positive experiences carried out in schools	5.2	94.8	199.7***
The involvement of teachers in projects is fundamental	9.6	90.4	162.3***

Note: *** $p < 0.001$ and CST = Chi-Squared Test.

of autonomous thought. This reflective perspective underlined the value of positive life experiences throughout the career of a teacher (98.4%) but principally at the start of carrying out the profession.

The teachers also revealed that the interest and commitment of the directorate of a school or school group in the promotion of learning opportunities and fundamentally in the continuation of positive experiences developed in the working locality was all of a professional illusion. So, in spite of the relevance given to continuous training in the development of the teacher, training activities are scarce and insufficient for a diagnosis of the formative needs of the teachers. Such training was organized often around the individual teacher, which favored the acquisition of knowledge but promoted isolation and the reinforcement of an image of the transmission of knowledge produced in a context outside the school environment.

Huberman (1989) and Gonçalves (2000) mention that during the cycles of the teaching career they distinguished various phases of professional pathway of teachers, thus sustaining these cycles in the analysis of changes that occur in certain variations like, for example, professional motivation. Therefore, for these authors, the professional development of older teachers, when compared with younger ones, results in a lack of incentives that allow them remain motivated.

Still our study revealed that the majority of the respondent teachers (68.7%), distributed throughout the three phases of the teaching career, which were characterized basically by enthusiasm, commitment, motivation, determination and much dynamism, reflected professional disinvestment and lack of motivation. That is to say, the daily experiences and feelings of the older teachers, which normally occur in the 'final' phases of their career, are nowadays experienced earlier by younger teachers, due to the lack of incentives that allow teachers to remain motivated in the profession until the end of their career.

In **Table 4**, according to the respondents, teacher evaluation negatively influences the attitudes of teachers in school (41.7%) owing above all to the magnitude that these 'extra' demands make on the teaching profession to the detriment to the process of teaching and learning.

So there emerged a group of aspects that shape the attitudes of the professionals—carelessness, mistrust, absent-mindedness, dropout—as were indicted to us in the responses of the teachers in the open questions of the questionnaire:

- *"The preoccupation with evaluation of performance increases carelessness about work with the students. It creates lack of time for preparations, reflection, planning..."* (Questionnaire 7)
- *"These guidelines are a bad influence, because they make us suspicious of everything and everybody. They are very constricting."* (Questionnaire 29)
- *"I took an attitude of absent-mindedness to everything that could be related with evaluation of teaching performance."* (Questionnaire 51)
- *"I feel a will to abandon the profession. It isn't worth continuing the fight."* (Questionnaire 75)
- *"It doesn't give dignity to our work and I'm a pawn, as a professional."* (Questionnaire 117)

Besides the assumption of an attitude of absent-mindedness, the teachers adopted a defensive attitude, pretending in this way that teacher evaluation does not interfere in the pedagogical practice and relationships that the teacher has with the students. In other words, teachers felt that morally they must protect and care for the interests of their students, which meant omitting in classroom, as far as possible, their professional disillusionment.

Table 4. The influence of teacher evaluation on the attitude(s) with respect to effects on their professional identity.

Indicators	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Q.Q
In what way does the evaluation of teacher performance influence your professional attitude in school?	4.5	53.8	41.7	98.2***

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

Normally, this type of attitude happens when teachers feel undervalued by whom they judge to have an obligation to recognize their work, thus giving them a problem of continuity or withdrawal from the profession.

This way, with it being an impossibility for continuing to be motivated and committed in the teaching activity, which they liked, the teachers, as an alternative to teacher uneasiness contained in the educational contexts, detached themselves from the “school machine” and focused themselves on the classroom in the fight “to do better for the students”. Here they tended to give them the best that they could: their attention and help with learning. These attitudes set out in the evidence showed a preoccupation of the teachers with their students and the proper fulfillment of a profession to which they are dedicated and whose dignity they tried to preserve in spite of the negative judgments of those that considered them to be workers with little dedication and disinterested about the future of their students. However, the teachers also recognized that when professional development is ruled by teacher uneasiness, it promotes professional disillusion and disinvestment with consequences for their person, student learning and in the construction of a school learning environment.

6. Conclusion

To be a teacher in present times has become a professional risk resulting from structural processes and from factors of a certain situation that implied a process of the rationalization of quality that is out of step with the principal factors that suit them.

With the persistent introduction of new policies, the structures of educational contexts continue to endure considerable upheavals and the teachers were confronted with a new way of feeling about the profession—professional disillusionment. In a perspective of suffering, new ways of being a teacher emerged.

From the sentiments manifested by the respondent teachers, we perceived that the policies did not stimulate the giving of a good professional performance, due to salary cuts, external control and to the rendering of accounts, which all threatened the feeling for and significance of the professional development of the teachers.

The principal preoccupation of the teachers has passed to a concentration on the management of their career with the objective of reaching the top, which has become, all of a sudden, more difficult to reach and which is a problem caused by the implemented political interventions in our educational contexts without any preparation and prior agreement.

Both situations created tiredness amongst the teachers, who were concerned about so many changes that they considered unnecessary. It was felt by the teachers that the educational reforms are pointless, because they do not engage the crucial point of making a teacher teach better, so that the students also learned better and more and, principally, so that both felt motivated and happy in school. Nevertheless, current educational policies and the working contexts brought out different and contradictory feelings, which have led teachers to making a living but feeling professional disillusionment and demotivation well before the termination of their teaching career.

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