

# THE GEOGRAPHY SYLLABUS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION IN PORTUGAL: INTERPRETATIONS BY AUTHORS AND (RE) INTERPRETATIONS BY TEACHERS

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## Abstract

*In 2001, the Currículo Nacional do Ensino Básico. Competências Essenciais [National Curriculum for Primary Education. Essential Competences] was published in Portugal. This document reorganizes basic level education from a curricular point of view. It is a fundamental reference document for curricular management in Portuguese schools and outlines guidelines for educational experiences as well as the essential competences, both general and specific, that students are to develop in each subject or subject area throughout their primary education.*

*Since its implementation until today, at initial teacher education level, working documents were produced by the Department of Geography of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto reflecting the interpretation of the documents issued by the Ministry of Education. These documents were shared by students, future teachers and also supervisors in the training sessions.*

*This article aims to contextualize the National Curriculum for Primary Education in Portugal, Curriculum Guidelines for Geography, present guidelines for the initial training of Geography teachers at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto, as well as to introduce the empirical study that aims to identify (re)interpretations carried out by teachers at schools within the scope of the National Curriculum for Primary Education and the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography.*

*The adopted stance, in light of Ball's policy cycle, aims to analyze academic discourses and documents produced at initial teacher education level of the Department of Geography of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto (context of influence and text production) as well as the contexts of action carried out in schools by teachers (context of practice).*

**Key words:** curriculum, geography curriculum guidelines, Ball's policy cycle, context of influence, context of text production and context of practices.

## Introduction

In the beginning of this century, curricular changes took place at the level of Primary Education in Portugal, resulting from the work developed by the Ministry of Education with the educational community. Such changes followed from the process of Participated Reflexion on Curriculum which gave rise to new forms of curricular design and assigned new mandates to schools and teachers from the point of view of legal discourse.

Regulated by Decree-Law No. 6/2001, of 18<sup>th</sup> January, the Curricular Reorganisation of Primary Education laid down a National Curriculum for this level of education, which is organized around gene-

ral competences, identifying specific competences for each subject area and presenting suggestions for their development around educational experiences to be provided to students.

At the same time as the implementation process of the National Curriculum, the Department of Geography of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto produced texts and working documents at initial teacher education level reflecting an analysis and interpretation of the documents issued by the line ministry.

By focussing the curriculum on the development of competences, the aim was to contribute towards an overview of Geography curricular management in which importance was given to the planning design and schemes adapted to new needs, to an integrated management of curricular orientations, to an eventual script of specific competences and their functional simplification.

These documents, which continue to be worked upon, aim to train teachers who, besides Geography specialists, should also be curriculum designers and managers, that is, teachers who have the know-how to configure curricular situations that are adequate to the contexts that characterize the school and construct actual views of a teaching professionalism.

The beginning of the 2009–2010 academic year marked the end of a cycle of Geography initial teacher education at the Faculty of Arts. Initial teacher education is now developed within the framework of the Masters in History and Geography Teaching. Based on empirical studies, in the light of Ball's policy cycle (1992, 1997, 1998), provide insights on the extent to which the National Curriculum for Primary Education, the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography – 3rd cycle and documents by the Faculty of Arts are generating influences and being interpreted in practice by teachers.

Thus, this article begins with references to assumptions for the configuration of a “curriculum as project”, considering the school as a place for decision with the ability to adapt the National Curriculum for Primary Education to the local reality, in which teachers can play an active role and become designers of the Curriculum. In addition, this role for teachers concerns the emergence of teacher education that involves teacher participation in the process of curriculum configuration and development.

In a second plan, this article presents a very brief reference to the Portuguese Education System and the context of the subject of Geography in Primary Education schools, followed by a presentation of the Curricular Reorganization that took place in the beginning of this century as well as of the National Curriculum for Primary Education and the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography as subject (3rd Cycle).

In another plan, the article places emphasis on the Initial Teacher Education for Geography student teachers at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto, pointing out to the work that has been developed.

The article further aims to emphasize the approach of Stephen Ball's policy cycle and the study that is being carried out regarding interpretations by young teachers, alumni of the Faculty of Arts, on the (re)interpretations with respect to the National Curriculum and the documents issued by the Faculty.

Lastly, some final considerations are presented since the study is currently being concluded.

### **The Curriculum as Project, the Teachers as Curriculum Designer and a Qualifying Teacher Education**

In the Portuguese Educational System, not so long ago, the concept of curriculum was regarded as a set of universal national programs. Schools were likewise seen as institutions whose function was to implement that curriculum in Portuguese youngsters through the teachers' performance inside the classroom.

However, society is constantly changing and becoming increasingly complex and multicultural due to the free movement of people and information sharing, creating worldwide phenomena. New learning resources “brought new problems to learning institutions, particularly for teachers, with the latter being now compelled to intervene in a completely different way” (Morgado e Ferreira, 2006:62).

While school is still a privileged location to systematically share knowledge to one of society's groups, we must nowadays be aware that knowledge, which was once society-centred, is now wider and constantly evolving, whilst also attainable by almost anyone in many other ways. This diversifies the

audience. School went from being a teaching institution for a segment of society to being a training location for everyone. Therefore, this new calling demands a restructuring to allow it to answer the needs of the present.

In this context, it becomes necessary to reflect on what the school should teach all society's students. Thus, we share the opinion of Zabalza (2003:17) on what is a school curriculum: "all sorts of dispositions and processes that each society develops to fulfil the right of children and youngsters to education and the development of personal and educational skills through school. Therefore, "curriculum" is what is done in school, i.e. the answer it gives, or that is given through it, to the right of children and youngsters to education".

Changes in our everyday life involve rethinking a curriculum that will be learned by a heterogeneous society where the students' learning must take on a new approach. According to Roldão (1999:36), it must integrate "a different range of learning content which includes reference knowledge areas without which one cannot access knowledge; activating and consolidating automatic knowledge building processes, mastering instruments to access knowledge in its various forms; developing social attitudes and skills; developing mechanisms of individual growth and improving quality of life".

According to this, curriculum must be transformed into a corpus which includes a set of measures and actions that are perceived differently by different individuals instead of being seen as a mere programme to be taught to students.

Thinking of the curriculum not in a normative perspective but as a space to manage and make decisions means that both the School and the teachers will need to take on new roles. As Zabalza (1992:47) states, "it is about understanding the curriculum as a decision-making space where the school community, at the school, and the teacher, in the classroom, by following a Programme and by programming, will state their own intervention boundaries." Furthermore, it means that the recipients should not be receiving the information but producing their own knowledge, being able to live in the current and future society.

School must become a decision-making place with an ability to match the National Curriculum to local reality. Teacher, as agents, must also be able to play an active role and become curriculum designers and managers.

It is also a matter of contemplating the Curriculum in a local context. Schools should also have the possibility to decide and manage what, how, why and who to teach, as well as instil knowledge, i.e. "that we will not see it as a set of subjects to teach in preassembled informational packages, or even as a set of very structured school programs which will enable us to obtain the desired skills. We need to see it as a set of intentions, means and actions that will allow students to actively participate in building-up their knowledge and cultivating themselves socially"(Leite, 2000:1).

During the 90's, the Portuguese Ministry of Education underwent the Participated Reflection Project on the Primary Education Curriculum which would later evolve to the Flexible Management of the Curriculum Project. The concept of curriculum as a project then arose, implying "establishing connections between those involved in the process, their purposes and the various skills. It entails finding a meaning for what you want and what you do as well as developing processes to make learning significant. It entails contemplating education in a social dimension and school as a directive that does not only include teaching but also extends to the training necessary for a real education" (Leite, 2000:22).

Considering these assumptions, aiming to improve the level and quality of learning can be the School's project, by taking on a set of options and learning priorities. These options must be thought of and planned as a whole. The school where the project will be implemented has the directive to undergo it with the purpose of allowing the development of its students, exchanging subject contents for a broader learning which, in turn, will allow the development of real life skills and promote the students' social integration. This means the school will need to design a curriculum of its own and make management decisions.

According to Alarcão (2001:13), this stance turns the school into a "reflexive school" and according to Leite (2003:124, 125), a "curricular intelligent school"<sup>1</sup>

In a multifaceted society, the curriculum cannot be prescribed by the Government for everyone in a particular country. It should be a fulfilled and experienced curriculum, adjusted to the local reality context.

If we consider school as a place to formulate and carry out local education policies, within the scope of the Participated Curriculum Management Project, each institution will be given the possibility of developing their own identity, expressed through their own School Educational Project, which explains the school's policies. This consists of a contract between the different members of the educational community who are all trying to achieve common goals based on the specificities of that school. The document outlines the school's priorities for the national curriculum and the school's Curricular Project. The Curricular Project is based on the essential and common competences around which the project and the contents of the different curricular areas will be organized.

This approach, which focuses on every school and on local curriculum management, was followed by Decree-Law 6/2001, during the current decade, recognizing "the need to go beyond the perception of the curriculum as a set of regulations to comply with, supposedly in a consistent way, in every classroom and to be pointed out, in a context of the recent schools' autonomy, the development of new curricular management practices". The curriculum is seen as "the set of knowledge and competences students should develop throughout their basic education" (art.2<sup>o</sup>-1) and it translated into "a set of competences deemed essential and structuring (...) for each of the cycles".

Thus, the Basic Education Curricular Reorganization for Primary Education shows and reiterates the importance of having a National Curriculum, which must also be considered both by School and Teachers on a local basis.

Within a framework that conceptualizes the school curriculum as a project, allowing it to be designed according to heterogeneity, local realities and different social contexts, teachers must fully master their teaching subject, all the while being aware of why they are teaching. They must break away from repetitious situations and be "curriculum designers" themselves (Leite, 2003:131).

Understanding teacher as curriculum designers will lead us to assume they will play a part in managing the curricular development process, making them mediators between proposals expressed in the National Curriculum and the students' accomplishment of the expected learning. Teachers will assure the process of replacing the formal curriculum with the real curriculum by intervening as curricular development agents.

In the educational context, teachers may participate in adapting/reconstructing the national curriculum according to the school context. They can make decisions and analyze specific situations, particularly when it comes to the Classroom Curriculum Project and in classroom context.

Paraphrasing Roldão (ME, 1999), teachers ought to make decisions, among others, at the level of "priorities in learning processes for each particular class and for each field of knowledge (disciplinary or not), according to students' modes of learning and their experiences and specific needs (...) make decisions regarding the structure and overall organization (per class) of learning processes to be accomplished in the classroom". Since, at an individual level, among others, teachers ought to make decisions regarding "priorities in teaching practice (...), how the learning process is organized, (...) the curriculum support materials to used and produced (...), operationalization/concretization of working methods to be adopted for each class (...), organizational options for the work developed in each class or student group (...), assessment of the improved learning processes achieved in the light of the applied working strategies".

Therefore, the teacher's role within a school that is intended to fit all can no longer be conventional. Teachers should instead assume the role of professionals who know how to be active and autonomous participating actors with the ability to respond to the needs of the school where they work and the student they teach. Teachers must be professionals that are capable of questioning themselves about what to teach, how to teach, and what are the outcomes to be achieved. According to Zeichner (1993:16), they must be a "reflective teachers" and, according to Giroux (1997:163), "transforming intellectuals". They ought to be professionals who reflect in action and on pedagogical action.

This function of decision maker and active actor must decidedly bring new ways of conceiving teacher training. Teachers are never totally neutral towards the curriculum, because, according to Leite (2000:133), "they ought to, at least, adopt a pedagogic discourse that acts as mediator of the official discourse, that is, teachers ought to filter the pedagogic discourse."

In view of a curricular discourse from which stems a new role for Schools and Teachers, nowadays considered active actors, we believe that there is a need to think of teacher training in such a way “that enables to acquire and rebuild skills, knowledge and predispositions to reinterpret the curriculum, which requires further teacher participation in the process of curriculum construction and development”, according to Flores (2000:151).

Hence, it is necessary to overstep the teacher education merely centred on the specialization of knowledge and techniques and which ought to be broadened to give rise to a teacher education that “socializes student teachers with the teaching profession that allows them to develop a curricular mentality (understood as awareness of the system in which teachers are integrated and the role or roles they perform or may come to perform” and that prepares them to be “co-authors of the curriculum and not just mere receptors” (2003:138).

A teacher education ought to though so as to develop training for potential attitudes of constant reflection and analysis, critical of its own practice (Garcia, 1999:131). In other words, in an unstable and unpredictable world, constantly changing at the level of teaching practice and schools, educating teachers as active actors ought to decidedly contemplate actions which allow for each professional’s development.

The images of a teacher that reflects on action and participates in teacher education, imply a perspective of teacher education that oversteps the “linear and hierarchical relationship between scientific knowledge and practice” (Flores, 2000:156), but which implies, according to Leite, “a professional socialization that broadens the field of disciplinary knowledge to their social usages” emphasizing the “enhancement of cooperation practices during the training period(s) and the advancement of promotional experiences towards the development of a participative awareness” and a “holistic and integrated overview of training processes, overriding the disciplinary perspective, in the sense of a critical attitude fomenting the self-reflective dimension of knowledge (Flores, 2000:157).

Stemming from the belief that the conception of teacher education ought to enable the development of awareness towards the role of educating actors and, as such, should reflect and investigate on their own practices. Practices which do not concern only classroom work, but also activities developed outside the classroom setting. It is difficult to understand a teacher education that only allows the development of best practices within the classroom, with a high degree of relational ability and that develops work within the school and community context. What does makes sense is a teacher education that goes farther and allows developing actions that lead teachers into constantly questioning their own teaching methods, that enable them to study and investigate pedagogical teaching modes and identify the interest to do so. A teacher education that develops a new pedagogical attitude, a new way of being in education. In other words, teachers who are capable of autonomous professional development, adopting attitudes of attentive and pertinent self-analysis.

### **Curricular Reorganization and the National Curriculum for Primary Education**

The Curricular Reorganization of Primary Education implemented at the beginning of this century defined a National Curriculum which was to be seen as a set of essential, general and specific competences, and as learning capabilities which must be offered to the students throughout this level of education. This curriculum organization is different from the previous ones, in that it focuses on the concept of the competences that need to be developed throughout compulsory Primary Education.

According to the National Curriculum for Primary Education issued by the Ministry of Education (ME, 2001:9), all citizens must develop, “in the course of their primary education, (...) a certain number of abilities, and acquire a set of fundamental processes” which must be gradually integrated in a “broader context of learning”, with the aim of enhancing the ability to think and reason, and the development of attitudes, values and procedures.

This perspective overlaps the notion of competence. This is “an overarching notion where knowledge, abilities and attitudes are combined and better mobilized”, or, as stated by the Portuguese Ministry of Education (*idem*), are “in action or in use”. According to the same source, the concept of competence is

related to the “process of activating resources (knowledge, abilities, strategies) in various types of situations, namely in problem situations”.

This line of thought defended by the Ministry of Education on this key concept follows the ideas suggested by Perrenoud (1999:7), wherein he states that competence is “the ability to act effectively in a specific situation, supported by knowledge, yet without being limited by it”, and in consistency with Roldão’s opinion (2003:20) when he states that competence means “knowledge represented as the effective ability to handle intellectual, verbal or practical situations and not the accumulated contents with which we do not know how to respond in real life situations, perform any mental operation nor solve any situation, or even think with”.

The concept is far from being consensual among education researchers, yet it embodies the notion of inter-related knowledge (of a conceptual, attitudinal and procedural nature) and its mobilization. The inclusive and mobilizing nature of extensive knowledge seems to be the key outlines guiding it.

Therefore, one of the key aims of the National Curriculum is to know how to use the knowledge felt to be needed by all citizens alike, in our current society. To this end, the Ministry of Education has identified the essential competences, at both a global level and within the various curriculum areas.

A total of 10<sup>2</sup> general competences were defined that are to be developed gradually throughout primary education in all curricular areas. To this end, the Ministry of Education clarified its transversal functionality, by stating that “the teachers of the respective curricular areas are to explain how this transversal functionality can be attained and is developed in each specific field of knowledge, and in each student’s learning context” (*idem*:16). The National Curriculum stipulates a set of actions on the teaching practice for each general competence, that are believed to be essential for the proper development of the said competence in the different areas and scopes of the primary education curriculum.

The guidelines on specific competences put forward by the Ministry of Education, and on which we are focusing, state that they are intended to (*ibidem*: 10) “identify the knowledge which will enable students to develop an understanding of the nature and processes of each subject, as well as a positive attitude to face an intellectual activity and the practical work inherent to that discipline”

This way of thinking and managing the curriculum thus implies a redefinition of the roles and actions of teachers. As responsible individuals and actors within the field of education, they have to identify and interpret educational problems and seek solutions to solve them. Teachers play a decisive role in curriculum management at schools, within their specific disciplinary group, in each of their classes.

In view of the National Curriculum, the School, seen as a privileged place for the training of active and involved citizens, is thus committed to the training of young citizens capable of thinking for themselves and of being autonomous when reacting to different situations in their daily lives. This implies a change of practices in contexts outside the classroom, but very particularly within the classroom, resorting to active methodologies that recommend the use of contextualized and meaningful learning.

### **Curriculum Guidelines for Geography as Subject (3<sup>rd</sup> cycle – Primary Education)**

Following the Restructuring of Primary Education, the *Currículo Nacional do Ensino Básico. Competências Essenciais* [National Curriculum for Primary Education. Essential Competences] (ME, 2001:17) was published. According to this document, the formulation of specific competences in Geography took into account “an inclusive perspective of attitudes, abilities and knowledge that are to be developed by the student through geographical education”<sup>3</sup>. The intention is that young students should acquire at the end of Primary education<sup>4</sup>, a set of competences that make them competent in terms of Geography. According to the Ministry, “the geographically competent citizen can master spatial skills and shows that he/she is capable of: visualizing facts in spatial terms, relating them; describing correctly the environment he/she lives or works in; developing a mental map of that environment; using different scale maps; understanding spatial patterns and comparing them; having a good sense of terrestrial orientation”. Further to these spatial skills, a geographically competent citizen (*idem*) “can also interpret and analyze critically geographical information and understand the relation between territorial and cultural identity, heritage and regional individuality”.

In addition to these assumptions, the Ministry of Education also defined the guidelines for teachers, so that the young citizens attending Primary Education can become geographically competent citizens. As such, throughout the teaching-learning process, teachers are expected to foster educational experiences with a view to developing skills related to research. To this end, they must be encouraged to conduct experiences in which students can learn how to observe, record and process information, raise questions, formulate conclusions and present findings. Geographical skills are to be developed through both field-work and group work, which favours the promotion of ideas and the production of conclusions.

Geographical education should be such that students can learn how to reply to a number of questions, for instance: Where is it located? Why is it located there? How is it distributed? What are the characteristics? What is its impact? How should it be managed for the mutual benefit of humanity and the environment?

The search for answers to geographical questions implies research on location, situation, interaction, spatial distribution and differentiation of phenomena on the earth's surface. The official documents define the grouping of competences into three fields: Localization, Knowledge of Areas and Regions, and Dynamics of Interrelations among Areas.

According to the *Currículo Nacional do Ensino Básico – Competências Essenciais (ibidem)*, these three fields contribute to the development of general competences in primary education; furthermore, a number of possible intersections between the general competences of primary education and the specific competences of Geography were also outlined<sup>5</sup>.

Through the different learning experiences proposed, competences are to be developed throughout the three cycles of Primary Education, and Geography teachers<sup>6</sup> may organize the teaching-learning process however they consider most appropriate to the contexts of their school and class, providing students with the opportunity to carry out activities that allow them to develop the know-how to contemplate space and become actors in the environment they live in.

According to this perspective, the Ministry of Education outlined a set of specific competences and learning experiences for each cycle. The Ministry invokes that during the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle of studies, in the field of Geography, students' curiosity should be stimulated to discover the World and they should be given the opportunity to explore new places and spaces in the land of the earth. Thus, it does not suffice to know where one lives, the street, town, city, region<sup>7</sup> and country because we are citizens of Europe and the World. The subject should therefore be developed around an organizational theme "Towards the Discovery of Portugal, Europe and the World", which the six major thematic areas laid down in the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography, evolve around.

These six major thematic areas – "Earth: Studies and Representations", "Natural Environment", "Population and Settlements", "Economic Activities", "Contrasts in Development" and "Environment and Society" – can be offered in a sequential and/or integrated manner, but the first theme "Earth: Studies and Representations" must always be the first to be studied. For each of these themes, a set of sub-topics<sup>8</sup> was identified proposing a number of educational experiences to be developed with students, but that is not of a compulsory nature. According to the Curricular School and Class Project, teachers can organize other experiences assuming the role of curriculum managers.

Such management should focus more on the interpretative aspects of several different educational experiences than the descriptive aspects of programme contents. In addition, the objective for geographical education is that students learn to apply concepts of space, place, region, territory, environment, location, geographical scale, geographical mobility, interaction and movement, leading to the development of a set of competences that allows them to learn to observe and conceive of space as well as to be actors in their environment.

Not only can teachers manage the topics/sub-topics and educational experiences, but they can also manage the study analysis scale. This scale should be selected so as to evince the geographical phenomena to be studied. In each programme topic, teachers can use the analysis scale that is most appropriate to the respective phenomena, but the studies should always refer to the reality in Portugal so that, by the time students complete the Primary Education level, they are aware of the geography of their country and know how to compare with another reality, similar to and/or in contrast with the local, continental and global scales according to the phenomena in study. It is important that students completing Primary

Education understand that geographical phenomena, physical and human factors are inter-related in a dynamic way, originating different spatial repercussions. It is important that teachers, based on actual cases (which can be a place, a region or a country) and case studies, guide students into interpreting and recognizing phenomena that occur on the face of the earth.

### **Initial Teacher Education for Geography Student Teachers at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto and Actions Developed**

At the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto, namely the Department of Geography, initial teacher education always had in view an analysis and interpretation of the educational and curricular policies. Preference was always give to training teachers with the ability to know, interpret, understand and reflect on curricular phenomena, that is, the aim was to train teachers as builders and managers of the curriculum. The focus was centered on a teacher education that allowed teachers to gain insights providing the ability to configure curricular situations adapted to contexts that characterize the school and construct actual views of teacher professionalism.

It has thus been a constant in our attention towards teacher education policies and aspects that privilege, above all, the construction of a curriculum understood as a process that involves a set of actors, at the same time implying construction at intentional level and de-construction at the practical level.

At the time the *Currículo Nacional do Ensino Básico. Competências Essenciais* and the Geography Curricular Guidelines (3<sup>rd</sup> cycle) were published, the lecturers of the Department of Geography of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto who were involved in initial teacher education started to develop an analysis and interpretation of the National Curriculum which not only relapsed in the sense of student teacher education, but also in relation to teachers that monitored them at school, the Trainee Supervisors.

This knowledge production was then presented, discussed and worked on together with students and privilege was give to gaining awareness of the pertinence and specificity of geographical education, curricular management, teaching methodology and also student learning assessment.

In the analysis, the focus was centred on the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography – 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle. Proposals for didactic scripts, year planning and didactic unit were presented. These proposals were organized around educational situations aggregative in the intention of contributing to an integrated management of the curriculum guidelines. The analysis also proposed changes to the specific competences of Geography in a perspective of functional simplification. In view of curricular flexibility, there was an attempt to breach the classical logics of mere sequencing of ways to organize and manage the curriculum. The guidance followed was to focus our work on curricular development, which is now expected to be a generator of competence development.

### **Ball's Policy Cycle**

Stephen Ball's policy cycle approach is a useful analytical reference for the analysis of education programmes and policies, given that it allows for a critical view of education policy trends from their initial formulation to their implementation in the practical setting.

According to Mainardes (2006:50), Stephen Ball together with Richard Bowe proposed a continuous cycle comprising five contexts: influence, text production, practice, results/effects and political strategy. This policy cycle approach has been discussed and improved by Ball and the article focuses on the first three contexts.

Adopting a post-structuralist perspective (*idem*), Ball and Bowe argue that "these contexts are inter-related, they do not have a time or sequence dimension and they are not linear steps" and each one (*ibidem*) "presents arenas, places and groups of interest and (...) involve disputes and debates". Still paraphrasing Mainardes (2006:51), the context of influence is where "normally policies are initialized and political discourses are built". In this context, in addition to being the context (*idem*), "where groups of



interest dispute to influence the definition of the purposes of education (...), are actors in social networks (...), and the contexts gain legitimacy and form a model discourse for politics". The context of influence today can be affected by global and international influences that ought to be analyzed and weighted in the formulation process of national policies. Nonetheless, they are always re-contextualized and interpreted by each Government. The migration of policies from global to local level is not done by mere transposition, but the policies are re-contextualized within the specific national contexts.

Without being evident or simple, the context of influence has a connection with the context of text production. The latter context is the most articulated with politics and its representations may gain various contours. Such is the case of officially legal texts, political texts, formal or informal comments on official texts, etc.

The development of the study hereby presented involves the role played by texts and discourse produced at national level and those produced by the Faculty of Arts within the scope of initial teacher education.

As previously mentioned, such interpretation process was progressively weighted together with student teachers and trainee supervisors, who are also school teachers. They reflect the analysis and interpretations of official documents on the part of teachers who taught the subjects of the Didactics of Geography area and monitored student teachers in primary and secondary schools. Based on their analysis and interpretations, this article aims to provide insights on an eventual (re)interpretation of the Official Documents, which is carried out in a context of influence and text production.

Notwithstanding, according to Ball and Bowe (1992), "the policy is not finished in the legislative moment". Political texts must be read according to the specific time and place of their production. In turn, these texts have actual readings and consequences, which are experienced within the third context – the context of practice. It is in this context that the education policy is subject to interpretation and recreation, and where it produces effects. It is in this context that changes to the policy may occur since it is subject to being recreated and (re)interpreted by the actors in question.

Based on the principle that every teacher has their own story, experiences and values, when teachers read texts on the curriculum policy, they do not do it in linear manner. They interpret texts differently because they have different ways of living and life trajectories, and they may reject, select or even ignore political texts.

This approach therefore assumes that teachers take on an active role in the process of interpretation and (re)interpretation of education policies producing repercussions in the policy implementation process.

In this perspective, to gather information on how teachers interpret the National Curriculum and the documents produced by the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto, it is necessary to focus on their everyday teaching practices and analyze their opinions.

This study adopts a stance that aims to analyze the discourse and academic texts produced at the level of initial teacher education at the Department of Geography of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto (context of influence and production) and analyze the contexts of action carried out in schools by their teachers (context of practice). Factors are thus analyzed at macro and micro level as well as the interactions between them.

### **Actual Interpretations and Possible (Re) Interpretations**

Given that the initial teacher education model for Geography student teachers at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto was modified and the National Curriculum for Primary Education was implemented a few years ago and disseminated throughout the country, it seems important to understand to which extent school teachers have interpreted this work and the work developed by the Department of Geography together with initial teacher education.

We have thus initiated a study centred on the National Curriculum for Primary Education. The purpose of this study is to gain understandings on how Geography teachers, namely Faculty teachers and alumni, have been (re)interpreting the National Curriculum and the documents produced by the Faculty

of Arts. The study also aims to make visible the practices which are experienced in schools by Geography teachers in connection with initial teacher education for Geography student teachers at FLUP, both as student teachers and as former supervisors. The goal is to produce knowledge on what is going on in schools at the level of (re)interpretations by Geography teachers regarding their practices of the curriculum prescribed at national and faculty level.

The adopted stance intends to analyze the way legal texts and academic documents are interpreted in practices (context of influence and text production) and analyze contexts of action carried out in schools by teachers (context of practice).

In addition, in the sense of aiming to understand their interpretations and (re)interpretations, seven teachers were invited to prepare three class diaries each. Each diary corresponds to three consecutive lessons (one per week) related to a Didactic Unit. In a prior meeting, each of teachers involved were given explicit information about what a class diary is and asked to prepare one in which they were to explore their activities at the level of planning and accomplishment for each lesson. The diaries would have to include lesson planning activities and didactic and evaluation documents to be used with students. They would also have to address their thoughts on the progression within a single lesson, expressing eventual opinions on the work developed in class.

Class diaries are used to the extent that they, according to Zabalza (2004:13), “are documents where teachers take note of their impressions about the progression of their classes” and because “diaries can be used more strictly for research purposes (as a resource designed to boost the knowledge available in the educational field)” (*Idem*: 16). The use of diaries is also, as argued by Yinger and Clarck (1985) quoted by Zabalza (*ibidem*: 41), applied as an “instrument to explore teachers’ planning activities”.

By making use of class diaries as a technique for research, they also function as a resource designed to enable knowledge on how Geography teachers explore their lesson planning activities and handle the way lessons progress, that is, how the Geography Curriculum is developed.

The prior meeting with teachers thus proceeded and a Didactic Unit was identified – Mobility – concerning the 8<sup>th</sup> year of primary education, that is the second year of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle. It was previously noted that each teacher was to lecture the Unit on different occasions during the school year, depending on the management of each school. For that reason, at the time of writing this article, some teachers are still giving classes and, as a consequence, not all diaries have been analyzed so far.

Based on the ones as yet collected, we applied a methodology of analysis and interpretation of the available diaries. An initial exploratory reading was carried out first. Then, a second reading followed by the exhaustive documentation of key notions in the sense of promoting different categories.

## Final Considerations

As previously mentioned, according to the National Curriculum for Primary Education and the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography, teacher can organize the teaching-learning process however they consider most appropriate to the contexts of their schools and classes, providing students with the opportunity to carry out activities that allow them to develop the know-how to contemplate space and become actors in the environment they live in.

In addition to diversified school and class contexts, teachers ought to provide students with educational experiences in which they learn to observe, document, handle information, put forward hypotheses, formulate questions, and present results. They should be able to answer several questions, such as “Where is it located?”, “Why is it located there?”, “How is it distributed?”, among others.

To foresee and programme educational experiences with a view to enable the development of research-related competences implies to give preference to pedagogy centred on students, engaging them in the construction of their own learning processes and teachers in their role of facilitators of learning contextualized in everyday life. The teacher’s attitude in relation to students is fundamental to predispose them to learn how to learn. Based on problem situations or challenges, students should be able to present solutions to issues contextualized in reality and they should be encouraged to adopt an attitude of discovery *per se*.

Concerning the topic of Mobility<sup>9</sup>, teachers should provide educational experiences revolving around central topics such as types of migration, migratory flows, and the causes and consequences of migration, in which the specific competences identified by the teacher, as previously mentioned, and according to the Annual Plans of the Didactic Unit and the Classroom Curricular Project.

According to the concept of competence in the meaning ascribed in legal documents by the Ministry of Education, the development of competence implies the mobilization of a set of knowledge (knowledge, know-how and citizenship) and therefore the mobilization of thematic, procedural and attitudinal contents.

Based on the analysis of class diaries prepared by the teachers, and at the level of lesson planning, one can infer that the themes were organized in a sequential manner and the geographical competences that ought to be developed were never actually focussed. One can almost always notice the concern in configuring educational situations referring to working documents, several different resources, such as images, texts, graphs and enquiries, and there is also an attempt to promote the construction of knowledge through vertical dialogue. The construction of knowledge integrates both knowledge and know-how. It refers to both the transfer of thematic contents, such as migrations, migratory flows, inter-continental and intra-continental migrations, as well as the know-how, and thus to the development of procedural contents, since preference is given to the interpretation of images, texts and maps. Hence, discourse reflecting practices rarely records procedures and never attitudes. Therefore, one can infer that the competence development is not a priority for these teachers. One can observe their concerns in putting the perspective on a teaching in which teachers take on the role of organizers of learning situations, for which they prepare documents shifting apart from school textbooks. These textbooks either guide small discoveries that students ought to make, or put students in a position where they ought to passively wait for the opportunity to answer the questions formulated by the teacher. There seems to be an understanding of the learning process, of a behavioural nature, in which learning can be seen as a synonym for acquiring habits in the sense of giving a prompt answer, even if that answer is a very enthusiastic one, given that students play a totally passive role in other subjects. One can also conclude that there is a major concern regarding the meticulous discrimination of contents, resources and activities, never directly approaching evaluation. In addition, in some cases, this organization stems from school-management decision making.

Such considerations are the first to be taken from the analysis of these diaries. As the diaries are analyzed, it seems more and more possible to deepen and enhance the extent to which teachers are interpreting the National Curriculum for primary Education and the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography, as well as the interpretations made at the level of initial teacher education at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto.

For the time being, it appears to be evident that the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography is being (re)interpreted as a normative curriculum to be supposedly accomplished equally through the whole of Geography classes, despite the fact that, from a legal point of view, schools may proceed with promoting student development by overstepping the range of subject matters with a view to develop broader learning experiences, and, at a local level, teachers may participate in the adaptation and reconstruction of the National Curriculum and the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography.

If political texts bear actual readings and consequences, experienced within contexts of practice, it looks as if the National Curriculum and the documents issued by the Faculty of Arts have had a reading and experience in the sense of rejection and/or ignorance by the part of actors. What is left to be done is to identify the cause or causes for such a phenomenon.

## Endnotes

1 – According to Leite: “An institution which, instead of only administering and distributing knowledge, according to a linear and convergent thinking, promotes systems to develop creativity and cognitive, affective and social competences. (...) a facility which does not rely exclusively on outside management because it has its own decision-making processes with the participation of the educational community and where, simultaneously, are real communication processes involving both teachers and students through which the community structures teaching and establishes learning”.

2 – The 10 General Competences:

- (1) Mobilize cultural, scientific and technological knowledge to understand reality and to handle everyday situations and problems.
- (2) Adequately use the languages of the different areas of cultural, scientific and technological knowledge.
- (3) Use the Portuguese language properly to communicate adequately and to structure the process of thinking.
- (4) Use foreign languages to communicate properly in practical situations and acquire information.
- (5) Adopt personalised work and learning methods appropriated to the intended objectives
- (6) Search, select and organise information to transform it into mobilizable knowledge.
- (7) Adopt the correct attitudes to solve problems and make decisions
- (8) Be independent, responsible and creative in performing activities.
- (9) Cooperate with others in joint tasks and projects.
- (10) Harmoniously relate the body with the surrounding space, both personally and interpersonally, in such a way as to promote health and quality of life. (ME, 2001:15).

3 – The Ministry of Education has defined 21 specific competences for Geography that are to be developed over the three years of the 3rd cycle of Primary Education, according to the three fields defined. Localization – • Compare various representations of earth, using the concept of scale; • Read and interpret globes, maps and charts of different scales, using captions, the scale and geographical coordinates; • Locate Portugal and Europe in the world, filling in and building maps; • Locate places using charts and maps of different scales; • Describe the relative location of their home town, using as reference the location of the region, the country, Europe and the world. In the field of Knowledge of the Places and Regions – • Use geographical terminology when describing places, regions and geographical distribution of phenomena, orally and in writing; • Formulate and reply to geography issues (Where is it located? How is it distributed? Why is it located there / Why is it distributed so? Why is it subject to changes?), using atlases, aerial photos, data bases, CD-ROMs and the Internet; • Discuss geography issues related to the places/regions/issues under study, using TV programmes, films, videogrammes, the media, books and encyclopedias; • Compare the distribution of natural and human phenomena using planispheres and maps of different scales; • Sort and classify the characteristics of geographical phenomena, listing the most important ones in various places; • Select the characteristics of geography phenomena responsible for changes in various places; • Conduct documentary research on the irregular distribution of natural and human phenomena at national, international and world levels, using various resources such as audiovisual equipment, CD-ROMs, the Internet, the media, statistic charts and tables; • Select and use graphic techniques, handling the geographical information in a clear and proper way, for instance in graphs (linear, histograms, sectorgrams, population pyramids), maps (of sections or others) and diagrams; • Develop the use of data/statistical indexes, reaching conclusions on real examples justifying the conclusions reached; • Problematize situations shown in projects, formulating conclusions and delivering them in simple/audiovisual oral and/or written presentations; • Analyze real cases and reflect on possible solutions, using geographical resources, techniques and knowledge. In the field of Dynamics of Inter-relations among Areas – • Interpret, analyze and problematize the inter-relations in natural and human phenomena presented in projects, formulating conclusions and delivering them in simple/audiovisual oral and/or written presentations; • Analyze real cases of human phenomena impacting on natural environment, reflect on possible solutions; • Reflect critically on the environmental quality of a place/region, suggesting effective and feasible actions to improve the environmental quality of those places; • Analyze real cases of land management that show the importance of preserving the environment to guarantee a sustainable development.

4 – The Portuguese Education System, namely as regards the school education system is constituted by three levels: Primary Education, Secondary Education and Higher Education. Primary Education is compulsory and is developed throughout 9 years and organized in three sequential cycles: the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles. The 1st cycle has a duration of four years (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th years), the 2nd cycle comprises two years (5th and 6th) and, lastly, the 3rd cycle has a duration of 3 years (7th, 8th and 9th).

It is at the level of the 3rd cycle of primary education that Geography is presented as an autonomous subject, integrated in the area of Human and Social Sciences and sharing with History a weekly workload of two blocks of 90 minutes in the 7th year and two and a half blocks in the 8th and 9th years.

5 – Some possible intersections between the specific and the general competences in Geography: \*Mobilization of distinct understandings (cultural, scientific, technological) to comprehend reality, exploring the conceptual and instrumental scope of geographical knowledge in the study of concrete situations in order to know the world; • Use different types of language, such as texts, charts, maps, graphs, photographs, films and videogrammes, to collect, analyze and report geographical information; • Adopt work methods adapted to the analysis scale and to the diversity of geographical phenomena under study; • Research, select and organize the geographical information needed for the analysis and understanding of the concrete problems of the world; • Conduct activities showing autonomy and creativity, for instance field work, simulations, games, study of concrete situations, mobilizing geographical knowledge; • Cooperate with fellow colleagues in joint projects and tasks, doing group activities, discussing different points of view, reflecting on individual experience and on the perception each student has of reality, so as to understand how relative geographical knowledge of the real world is. ME, DEB: 2001, p. 109.

6 – Teachers with professional qualifications in Teaching Geography only teach the subject in the 3rd cycle of Primary Education and in Secondary Education. Geography contents in the 1st and 2nd cycles are taught by teachers with other professional qualifications, particularly by History teachers, as is the case of History and Geography of Portugal (2nd cycle)

7 – In the 1st cycle, specific competences and learning experiences should be developed in a major area called “Discovering the Geographical Environment” within the domain of Environment Studies; in the 2nd cycle, geographical education is integrated in the subject of Portuguese History and Geography and geographical competences are defined in relation to the area called “Discovering of Portugal and the Iberian Peninsula”.

8 – The following sub-topics for each of the major topics in Primary Education major topics are identified: For the topic “Earth: Studies and representations” – Description of Landscapes; The use of maps to represent the earth’s surface; Location of the different elements on the earth’s surface. For the topic “Natural Environment” – Climate and Vegetation Weather and Climate (Distribution and Characteristics of Climate and Distribution and Characteristics of Vegetation); Relief (Physical Relief Assemblies, Dynamics of a Hydrographical Basin, Dynamics of the Coastline); Risks and Disasters (Causes of natural disasters and their effect on man and on the environment). For the topic “Population and Settlements” – Population (Distribution and factors impacting on the development of populations and behaviour of demographic data); Mobility (Types of migrations, Migration flows, Causes and consequences of migrations); Cultural Diversity (Identity and differentiating factors of populations); Human Settlements (Urbanization and rurality, Structure of urban areas and Ways of life in urban and rural environments). The topic “Economic activities” includes sub-topics Economic activities: resources, production processes and sustainability (Agriculture and Fishing, Industry, Services and Tourism and environmental, social and economic); Networks and Transport and Telecommunications (Modes of transport, products to be transported and distances, Impact caused by the development of transports within areas and the Importance of telecommunications in current society. The topic “Contrasts in Development” – must deal with Developed Countries vs. Developing Countries (Development Indicators) and Interdependence between areas with different levels of development (Obstacles to development and Solutions to reduce development contrasts). Lastly, on “Environment and Society” – Environment and Sustainable Development (Changes in global environment, Major environmental challenges and Strategies to preserve heritage).

9 – In all other topics, teachers should provide experiences related to the key topics and the specific competences identified by teachers are to be developed.

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