

Research Note

Curriculum changes and Teacher Training: The pedagogy of geography teaching in Portuguese schools

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Contextualisation

Research in geographical education is recent in the geographical community. In Portugal over the last decade some important steps have been taken in order to research different aspects of geographical education in schools. This paper presents research centred on geography teachers and how they have been adapting to changes in Geography curricula. It intends to be a relevant contribution to future teacher training programmes.

Abstract *The present changes in the Portuguese geography curriculum have raised several questions about teacher's practices. In fact, in the Portuguese context, there is little previous research in the area of how teachers adapt to curriculum reforms and reorganization; what they are doing in classrooms; what kind of information is being provided and how teachers cope with on-going change. Considering that research into teacher practice allows effective strategies to be identified; suggests new training courses and contributes to an understanding of the process of teaching and learning, the research proposed in this research note aims to find out what kind of geography teaching is being done in Portuguese schools using an empirical approach involving both qualitative and quantitative methods.*

Introduction

The purpose of the research is to investigate curriculum changes in geography as it is being taught in Portugal and how geography teachers have adapted to the changes they are experiencing. In Portugal, in recent years, school geography has been reorganized both in terms of its content and pedagogic objectives. However, these curriculum changes have happened without a programme of teacher training. This fact is certainly a problem for many teachers who must be facing serious difficulties in the implementation of many of the goals of this 'new' school geography.

The kind of difficulties geography teachers have been facing and what teaching strategies they have been implementing as a result, remains to be seen. According to Slater (1987) selecting teaching strategies to teach particular curriculum content is as important as selecting the content itself. In fact, teachers should have the opportunity to learn different teaching strategies to enhance certain aspects of learning in geography (Balderstone, 2000). This is certainly a starting point for the research proposed in this paper.

The importance of researching teacher practice

Teachers have a fundamental role in the development of school curricula. So, it is very important to know how their practice has changed in recent years given the curriculum changes occurring in Portuguese schools. Initial teacher training in Portugal takes place at universities. Thereafter, further training is left to the consideration of teachers themselves. It is compulsory in the sense that it is a part of career development, but it does not necessarily happen in the field they teach (Geography, History, and the other compulsory subjects) as it can be done in areas such as ICT, Psychology, Assessment, and so on. Graves (1971) has stressed the important relation between teaching and learning in geography education. More

recently, the publication of some handbooks for geography teachers such as those by Boardman (1987), Bailey and Fox (1986) and Kent (2000) have shown the importance of what teachers teach and how they structure their classroom activities.

In Portugal, this research remains to be done. In initial teacher training courses (although delivered using different models by different universities) there is a concern to involve trainee teachers in practical strategies for effective teaching and assessment. After this initial teacher-training year, teachers loose contact with the universities and become engaged in their teaching as a profession. There is, in fact, a need to do research in this area, to enter teachers' classrooms and then disseminate effective strategies (Balderstone, 2000).

In Portugal, The Basic Law of the Educational System (LBSE) was published in 1986. It suggested that teacher training should provide teachers with the necessary information, methods, and scientific and pedagogic techniques, adequate to the undertaking of their profession. This training, it suggested, should be flexible, based in pedagogic practices, favour stimulating innovation and research concerning educational activities, and should be an active and participatory training, leading to a reflexive and continuous practice of self-formation and self-learning.

Since 1986, the geography curriculum has undergone reformulation. Many of these changes involved little teacher participation: more significantly for this research, there was also little adequate additional teacher training. Studies about geography teaching show that teacher research can raise important questions about taken-for-granted views and practices (Roberts, 2000). This is particularly important when trying to understand how teachers cope with curriculum changes and how their practice adapts as their career progresses.

Believing that geography teachers should not neglect their own professional practice and should continue the process of developing the pedagogical knowledge they obtained during their initial training (Balderstone, 2000), the proposed research, involving Portuguese teachers, is particularly relevant. Many teachers could benefit from the dissemination of good practices if geography teaching training, informed by research, was made available to the Portuguese educational system.

Proposed research questions and research methodology

This research will address a number of research questions: How has the Portuguese geography curriculum changed in the last 25 years? How did geography teachers adapt to recent instances of curricular re-organization in Portugal? What kinds of difficulties are apparent following the implementation of such changes in the classroom under the new curriculum? What kind of training of geography teachers has occurred in Portugal in the last 25 years? How have their practices changed (or not)? What kind of continuous training would they like to have? Why is it important to research geography teaching?

The proposed research will be empirical: it will try to enhance the validity of the research findings using a design in which triangulation of methods will take place using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The method of case study will be used considering that this kind of research implies exploring the problem in its natural setting (the classroom) and trying to make sense of the situation (in this particular case, how teachers use teaching methods and strategies). This part of the research will involve the collection of empirical materials that will describe routine and problematic moments.

The method of case study is also a useful way to look at a particular situation, collect data, analyse and interpret findings within their context and then as a way to report findings. The qualitative data will be analysed in interpretive ways, which means that the researcher makes judgements about what the data say. Of course, this interpretation will be done in the light of

theory. The role of theory in case studies is very important as it must be seen as the design of research steps according to some relationship to the literature, policy issues or other sources (Yin, 2003).

In this study descriptive theory is more suitable, as it facilitates theory testing within a rich data collection process, both qualitative and quantitative. The case studies of the research must contain elements that are particularly relevant, and the researcher should be able to predict certain outcomes if theory holds true (Descombe, 1998). This means that the use of case study in this research intends to gather in-depth information in order to understand theory.

To enhance the validity of research findings, as previously mentioned, a survey will also be carried out. This will be done through the Portuguese association of geography teachers and will seek to access the contribution of a wider number of geography teachers in line with the research goals. Quantitative data will be analyzed using statistical analysis. The empirical research will take place in the school year of 2006/2007.

Considering the ideas presented, it would prove extremely important to have some feedback from researchers working in the same or similar areas. Stimulating interaction among researchers is a significant contribution to the field of educational research in general and therefore it is welcomed in this particular research.

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