

EDUCATION POLICIES AND TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE PERCEPTIONS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Rosalinda Herdeiro¹ & Ana Maria Costa e Silva²

¹Research Centre in Education, University of Minho, Portugal,

rosbrito@aeiou.pt

²Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology, Institute of Education, University of Minho, Portugal

anasilva@ie.uminho.pt

Abstract

This paper is part of ongoing research undertaken for a PhD thesis in Education Sciences, specialty of Curriculum Development. The objective is to understand the impact of recent legislation – Teaching Career Statute (TCS) and its respective Evaluation of Teacher Performance (ETP) – with particular emphasis on the (re)construction of the identity, career and professional development of teachers.

In this context we were able to formulate these research questions: do the government's education policies encourage teacher development? Will opportunities for teacher development be created in schools? Will the goal of improving the quality of teaching be achieved in education contexts sustained by teaching *malaise*?

In this paper we shall explain the perceptions of elementary school teachers recounted in written and oral biographical narratives and in three discussion groups set up for the purpose. In addition we present some of the results yielded by responses to a questionnaire sent out to 396 elementary school teachers and their statistical analysis using the chi-square test and t-test.

The professional experiences recounted by the teachers suggest outcomes different from those foreseen by Portugal's policymakers, emphasising the weaknesses and inapplicability of the core objectives established in the legislation on the Portuguese system.

Keywords: education policy; professional development; teaching quality.

Introduction

At a time of complexity and change, European schools, and particularly their teachers, have often been faced with (new) demanding challenges that entail ever-more refined professional skills, with repercussions on the teacher's work, professional development and career.

In recent decades the changes have “challenged the professional autonomy of teachers and raised the question about what it means to be a professional under public scrutiny that is increasing all the time” (Day, 2001: 21), arousing in the European Community a concern to stimulate education contexts for change.

So policies for change have to be instigated that promote healthy education environments, i.e. ones that see school not simply as a source of information, but more importantly as a place of motivation and learning – for students and teachers alike.

Education requires highly qualified teaching, acquired in different forms from those used so far (Dean, 1991), basically focused on teacher professional development with “emphasis on collaboration, cooperation between teachers and anyone else who is legally responsible for

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education” (Day and Sachs, 2004: 7), without teachers abdicating their status of “custodians of their professionalism” (Silva, 2007: 162) during their teaching career.

Portuguese education policies and professional development of teachers in the school

Schools have always been influenced by a country's historical and cultural changes in the economic, social and political sectors which have interfered in school organisations, specifically in teaching and in the skills and content to be taught to students.

The consolidation of the right to education that has led to the appearance of educational communities whose characteristics are heterogenic and changeable, which has implications for the need to coordinate the action of teachers, has paved the way for discussion and consideration of schools and their main actors.

These circumstances have led to a new conception of professional performance based on strategies that can ally quality of teaching with quality of learning (Morais and Medeiros, 2007), leaving no alternative but to review attitudes, conceptions and methods and create a climate of professional development within the school.

With the publication of the Basic Law for the Education System¹, another milestone in Portuguese education was built. It determined that schooling for nine years (elementary education period) should be universal, compulsory and free, and repeated other aspects, including the right to and the democratisation of education, as established in the Portuguese Constitution of 1976.

But the major innovations of this law were its reorganisation of the education system (elementary, secondary and higher), and the broadening of the concept of school, taken as an education community belonging to a system of relations with parents and local political bodies, based on an autonomous educational project and shared by all the interested parties in the process (Afonso, 1998; Correia, 2000).

In this context it has to be mentioned that, in the wake of the publication of the Basic Law for the Education System and identification of the economicist intentions of society, the issue of teacher assessment reappeared on the political agenda. The first assessment model emerged in the early 1990s² and its aim was “to strengthen the autonomy of schools and foster the professional development of teachers” (Curado, 2002: 39).

The Teaching Career Statute, published after extremely vigorous trade union action, favoured the introduction of the most innovative element in the teaching career – the creation of a *single career* (Alves-Pinto, 2008), consummated with the publication of Decree-Law 139-A/90.

With the publication of this law, performance assessment became a necessary and meaningful premise, but trade union leaders believe that its operationalisation needs to consider very carefully the *kind of assessment* to apply (Alves-Pinto, 2001). Following discussions between the unions and the ministry of education, the TCS ended up containing an intrinsic form of assessment, because the assessment could not be a bureaucratic process. It was basically

¹ Law no. 46/86, of 14 October.

² Regulatory Order 14/92 of 4 July implemented the first teacher assessment policy.

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a report of what each teacher had done and, if it was made at a specific point in the transition from the 7th to the 8th scale it was based on the preparation and discussion of the person's professional CV before a panel.

The law under discussion has now been amended, leading to another one³ – designed to optimise resources and reduce the weekly lesson load for students, by cutting the 'project' area from the list of non-subject curriculum options and placing more emphasis on supervised study so as to encourage autonomy and improve school outcomes. The intentions of this law are being contested by the teachers, backed by the unions, because they once again disagree that the economic woes of the country should obstruct the course of education and hamper the adoption of high quality education.

In Dean's words (1991), professional development suggests a process whereby teachers become more professional. So professional development can be seen as growing in certain aspects of professionalism and can be legitimately applied to the development of a teacher or group of teachers, in the work context, where the emphasis is on reflection (Herdeiro, 2010).

Morais and Medeiros (2007) add that the most important part of professional development "is the broadening and self-development of professional knowledge" (*idem*: 33) thereby valuing essential premises like teachers knowing their individual mental structures, the thinking that influences their actions/attitudes in the classroom and peer relations.

According to Day's (2001) line of research, we see that the interaction of various professional experiences that happen during their teaching life with the contexts in which they work – from the classroom and school to the social and political contexts – derives from teachers' reflection and action. This conditions their attitudes towards the need for professional development.

For Morais and Medeiros (2007: 35), the professional development initiatives promoted by school groupings/training centres should help teachers to "acquire and develop teaching strategies and techniques which may effectively promote the active construction of the students' learning's meaning and its self-regulation".

So we may ask: does the latest legislation passed in Portugal stimulate teachers' professional development in the school? Or does it help to drive the factors that inhibit their professional development?

Very recently an international study by Flores, Veiga Simão, Rajala and Tornberg (2009) has confirmed the influences mentioned earlier and was able to pinpoint a range of factors that inhibit teacher development in social environments (economic crisis and devaluation of teaching profession), personal environments (professional demoralisation), education system-related environments (legal uncertainty, too much red tape), and environments related to school organisation (lack of stronger leadership, activity overload, increased red tape).

This obsessive legislative frenzy by governments to impose targets on teachers, regardless of the culture and context of the educational contexts has been hotly opposed in schools, preventing teachers from developing professionally and significant changes from being introduced (Pacheco, 2002), the latter remaining "in the field of expectations that they have generated" (Morgado, 2005: 76).

³ Decree-Law no. 18/2011

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The upheaval and conflict in the world of education continued throughout the decade and reached its peak in 2007 when the Ministry of Education, unmoved by the theoretical considerations of experts in education, reformulated the TCS⁴ and regulated the teacher assessment process⁵ based on the policy of the 'need for change' without preparing educational contexts.

The unrest, challenge and resistance of the teachers to the changes has lasted, on the whole, until this year, forcing the ministry of education to undertake a series of revisions of the TCS in response to the climate of *malaise* and inability to establish conditions favourable to the implementation of the assessment process in schools.

So, after yet another (re)appraisal of the various stages of the assessment process, particularly the most fiercely contested ones, the Ministry of Education decided to simplify it to make it easier to apply.

After three years of constant strife (2008 to 2010) with the Ministry of Education, teachers and unions finally saw equality between teachers restored, putting an end to categorising them as 'classroom teachers' and 'senior teachers', and so reinstating a single category for the teacher career structure⁶.

The principles governing the change in the TCS were established in Regulatory Order n^o. 2/2010 of 23 June. The criteria of rigour and appreciation of professional merit were maintained, and it was established that performance assessment should be carried out under simplified procedures, with the *rapporteur*⁷ monitoring the assessed teacher's performance and permanently interacting with him/her.

But more legislation has been passed very recently to account for an assessment process which, from the very start, was clearly unsuited to the Portuguese educational contexts. Its implementation on the ground remains dubious, regardless of being patched up, and this is creating significant and widespread mistrust in those most directly affected by the assessment – the teachers.

Through the theoretical contextualisation and the content of current education and curriculum policies in Portugal it is wholly pertinent to mention the perceptions of elementary school teachers with respect to the main factors that hamper their professional development in school: competition and individualism; the escalation of tasks; excessive red tape, and professional demoralisation.

Method

Our reference was the contextualisation outlined briefly above, to undertake research as part of a PhD project with elementary school teachers. Some of the results are presented in this paper. The main purpose was to identify the elements involved in teacher professional

⁴ Decree-Law no. 15/2007, of 19 January.

⁵ Decree-Law no. 18/2011

⁶ Decree-law no. 75/2010, of 23 June

⁷ The *rapporteur* is the member of the assessment panel responsible for monitoring the professional development process of the assessed teacher, with whom they remain in permanent interaction so as to enhance the training aspect of performance assessment.

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development and the (negative) implications that recently passed legislation has for professional development in the school.

Among the goals of this research – those that interact most directly with the outcomes presented and discussed here – are: i) to identify the views of elementary school teachers on the recently passed legislation; ii) to learn the impact of the laws on teacher professional development; iii) to examine the factors that inhibit professional development in school.

We thus chose to combine quantitative and qualitative research approaches for our study.

In phase one, in 2008, the eight elementary school teachers recounted their perceptions after the TCS and EPT laws had been published, with implications for the (re)construction of identity(ies), for the career and for professional development.

In phase two, in 2009, a questionnaire was designed. It contained closed and open questions and Likert scales and was based on the outcomes of the narratives, the legislation and a literature review. It was sent out to 396 elementary school teachers who are working in the same schools as the eight teachers whose accounts had been collected. This was our sample.

The questionnaire was returned by 63% of the teachers (249 of the total) and these were then processed and analysed with the SPSS programme (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 17.0.

In 2010, the last phase, the teachers who had volunteered to take part in the next phase when they completed the questionnaire were put into one of the three discussion groups that were formed to identify the internal aspects of the issue under discussion, through subjectivities shared and assimilated by the group to construct their own discourse in the context. Later on in this phase the key-informant eight teachers were again asked to give an oral account of their perceptions and experiences in school, in recent years.

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Informants	8 elementary school teachers	249 elementary school teachers	20 volunteer elementary school teachers 8 elementary school teachers
Data collection method	Written biographical narratives	Questionnaire	Discussion groups Oral biographical narratives
Period	October - December 2008	June - December 2009	March - May 2010

Table 1 – Summarise of our research

The operationalisation of the phases enabled us to get useful information, almost to saturation point, to obtain valid responses to the research questions, i.e. information that ensured the comprehension and appreciation of the *voices* and *feelings* of the teachers in their professional practice, in light of recent changes in education.

Characterisation of the sample

Of our sample we should note those who have been with us since our Master's thesis (2006/2007): the eight elementary school teachers who have been hugely important, giving the information very easily because they have real knowledge of the events and because of their willingness to impart this knowledge in a spirit of constant cooperation.

These teachers are still our "key informants" (Gómez *et al.*, 1999: 127), especially in **phases 1 and 3** of our study. Table 2 summarises their relevant personal and professional details.

Teacher	Characterisation					
	Grouping (Vertical)	Age	Length of service	Category	Duties	Education
Sónia	B	36	14	Teacher	Establishment coordinator	First degree
Patrícia	C	39	13	Teacher	-----	First degree
Amélia	G	47	21	Senior teacher	Establishment coordinator	First degree
Carolina	E	39	14	Teacher	-----	First degree
Elsa	D	39	13	Teacher	Establishment coordinator	Master's
Catarina	F	38	13	Teacher	Establishment coordinator	First degree
Diogo	A	53	27	Senior teacher	Year coordinator	First degree
Gabriela	H	43	22	Senior teacher	Teachers' council coordinator	First degree

Table 2 – Characterisation of the eight key teachers

Of the 249 respondents to the questionnaire, 80.7% are female and 19.3% male, which signifies the predominance of women teachers in the groupings surveyed.

In terms of age, there were more in the 31 to 40 age bracket (39.0%) and in the 41 to 50 bracket (30.5%).

In terms of education, 85.1% of the teachers have first degrees (licentiate), 5.6% had already shown a personal/professional interest in doing a Master's and 8.8% have the qualification provided by their initial training (Bachelor's degree).

Most of the teachers (48.2%) are in an insecure professional situation because they are still under contract. The teachers with the most professional experience in the Grouping Table and Pedagogical Area amount to 51.9%, balancing the percentage of teachers under contract.

Finally, another significant figure characterising the respondents is length of service, with the highest percentage being those with less than 10 years' service in teaching, or 37.8%. Next highest was the percentage with 11 to 20 year's service, 30.9%.

Teachers with up to 20 years' service (68.7%) is a well-established group in terms of career and professional experience.

After this brief description of our sample, we should stress the longitudinal nature of the research. This aspect makes it somewhat unusual among studies that investigate the *experiences* of teachers with respect to how they develop and perceive themselves over their professional career.

In this article we shall explain the perceptions of elementary school teachers recounted in written and oral biographical narratives collected in the two phases mentioned and in three discussion groups set up for the purpose. In addition we present some of the results yielded by responses to a questionnaire sent out to 396 elementary school teachers and their statistical analysis using the chi-square test and t-test.

Results

Factors impeding professional development

- Competition and professional individualism

Teachers currently feel more anxious about the *birth* of a (new) professional and personal relationship in the competitiveness that dignifies the rivalry between teachers so as to achieve some gain, as we were told:

"(...) I've noticed a certain rivalry and I see that people, when they do something that they even think that it's, that it's good, that has results, that leads to people making progress and they notice, they try to hide it (...)" (Patrícia, oral account/2010),

"(...) because, I'm the one who's going to benefit from my assessment... and worse, I'll gain advantage from my assessment if the others don't, because if I stand out from my colleagues, I'm going to benefit" (Mário, GD2).

Competition is an acquired reason that our culture chooses to strengthen, not caring about the professional goals of others, ignoring team work in schools, inevitably ruining all the efforts that have been made in schools to sustain teaching in a relationship of collaboration, as teachers explain:

"This is no good, it's terrible, it's not bad, it's appalling, it means that I'm getting ready to stride ahead of all my colleagues (...)" (Mário GD2).

"They don't share, or if they do it's a lot later, so that someone will know that it was their work, and I'm not used to this, I've come from somewhere where this didn't happen, where teamwork really was the norm (...)"(Catarina, oral account/2010).

So teachers are 'shutting themselves into their own world' and forgetting about the others, choosing the times to show themselves publicly, preferably when their superiors are around, to please them and show that they are doing different *things* and doing them better than the others, believing that they shine in the group, as we were told:

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“And people are starting to close up, I mean they show something as a good result, but don't tell you anything else, really so that you won't do the same (...)” (Patrícia, oral account/2010)

“Teachers like to be noticed for new things when their superiors are around (...)” (Elsa, written account/2008)

“(...) the people who do well are those who do really nice things, I think that's it, I really think that's it...” (Moura, GD1).

In a competitive environment, it is rare to find teachers helping one another, since they are fighting for their own objectives to get the advantage, the reward, the position they want – a “Very Good” or “Excellent” rating on the performance assessment, the coordination of a project, for instance – pleasing the students' parents and showing indifference to the (negative) consequences that can affect the teaching body, even finding that this type of relationship does nothing for teaching professionalism:

“(...) we're looking to see who's doing nice things in the classroom (...)” (Camila, GD2)

“(...) with my colleagues there's a lot of interest in wanting to be better, mostly with the parents, showing more (...)” (Ana, GD1).

“(...) not being synonymous with a good professional” (Q. 106).

So the culture of teaching competitiveness leads to the reinforcing of an individualist culture, discouraging a collaborative culture based on sharing and a spirit of solidarity found in some schools which, finally, once again fell into the realm of individualism, as Diogo says:

“(...) sharing, the spirit of solidarity, not now common in schools, apart from exceptions that break the mould, they've definitively descended into individual kingdoms (...)” (Diogo, written account/2008).

In the perception of the teachers, individualism is linked to defensive behaviour, to mistrust and professional anxiety, as they told us:

“(...) mistrusting everything and everyone, it seems that there's always someone that wants to intrigue against us” (Amélia, written account/2008)

“This kind of assessment does nothing to improve a teacher's performance, since it creates a great deal of anxiety in a teacher” (Q. 56).

Through the complicated and constraining situation existing in schools today, individualism is seen not as a personal failing of the teacher, but as induced by the conditions in the workplace that requires an organisation of priorities:

“(...) will [the assessment model] conversely contribute to the emergence of a selfish and competitive professional culture that is demoralising and inspires insecurity?” (Carolina, written account/2008).

“(...) people shut themselves off a lot, spend a lot of time on themselves (...)” (Catarina, oral account/2010).

- Intensification of teacher work

The teachers taking part in this research feel that they are being seriously overloaded with tasks: they have more responsibilities, are more accountable and need to struggle with a wide range of skills in and out of the classroom; it is hard and affects the teaching role because far too many demands are made in school, as they told us:

"This change tried to place more responsibility on schools and teachers (...)" (Elsa, written account/2008).

"(... we've got so many things to run there, from behaviour (...)" (Fátima, GD3).

"I feel that my job has been made harder (...)" (Catarina, written account/2008).

"(... my teaching work may be affected; there are so many demands (...)" (Elsa, written account/2008).

Furthermore, teachers are forced to tackle administrative assessment tasks, and supervision and educational guidance in schools. They spend a great deal of time on guidance and/or attending meetings of all kinds – of teachers, year coordination, parents and guardians, management, school coordination, teacher assessment, not to mention informal meetings – leaving them little time for useful work in the classroom, or time for themselves (as a person and a professional) and their families, as our participants make clear:

"(... teachers' activity is so taken up that most of the planning, support materials for classes, organisation of files, reports, preparation for meetings ... is done at home (...)" (Gabriela, written account/2008).

"(... they really prejudice actual teaching because the teacher has countless parallel duties as well as teaching (...)" (Manuel, GD1).

"(... in addition to being, to having a class, I'm the establishment coordinator, too (... and I'm feeling a bit lost at the moment, I'm not managing to reconcile the two jobs, establishment coordinator requires a lot from me (... the class is suffering because I'm doing the other job (...)" (Catarina, oral account/2010).

So teachers see this job overload as a factor that hampers professional development, with adverse effects on the student teaching and learning process, and on professional identity.

- Too much bureaucracy

Overall, the elementary school teachers find the reformulation of the Teaching Career Statute (TCS), especially the performance assessment model, to be a policy that has a negative impact on their conceptions regarding their development, with particular emphasis on excessive bureaucracy, as Table 2 shows.

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Indicator	Positive	Negative	CST*
I've got too much red tape to sort out	92.8	7.2	182.2***
Schools/groupings suffer constant legislative attacks	65.5	34.5	23.8***
The teaching profession is being stripped of its character, and its main function forgotten	83.5	16.5	112.0***

* CST = Chi-Square Test

Table 3 – Impact of recent legislation on professional development

This discontent applies especially to the statement that schools/groupings are subjected to constant legislative attack (65.5%) and naturally leads to too much red tape in the school (92.8%), stripping the teaching profession of its character since its chief function is being forgotten: teaching.

The teachers think these education policies are inappropriate, lacking recognition from the authorities in charge of the groupings and the education community, and they also prevent good pedagogic practice in the classroom because of the inordinate amount of time spent discussion bureaucratic issues at the so-called pedagogic meetings.

“Unsuitable education policies, a lot of red tape and no recognition”. (Q. 80)

“The more effort we make to try to improve the way we teach and to see that the students learn, the more we're criticised or observed”. (Q. 146)

“The bureaucracy that's forced on schools at the moment means that teachers are asked to do far too much work”. (Q. 7)

“Being a teacher is being a man of papers, red tape and abandoning the students”. (Q.10)

“(…) we're drowning in bureaucracy, that's not been mentioned yet here, loads of red tape, and then we go to meetings to deal with more of it, because information comes from the pedagogical council, goes to the meeting, information associated with the bureaucracy (…)” Moura, GD1).

- Lack of professional motivation

At the conference on *Professional development of teachers*, organised during the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Canário (2007) underscored the importance of professionally motivating teachers as an alternative to fighting the increasing complexity of the profession, which corresponds (as we have been saying) to more papers, fresh demands and an expansion of the profile of its professional mission.

But when we asked the elementary school teachers if they felt motivated and satisfied in their daily work, given the policy implemented in their country, they said that the recent legislation (ECD and ADD) interfered negatively with their professional motivation (62.6%), impeded their professional development in school (95.5%), and so compromised the quality of their teaching performance in the school context.

Indicator	Positive	Negative	CST*
Motivated	37.4	62.6	15.6***
Do you feel that the new Teaching Career Statute and performance assessment are encouraging your professional development?	4.5	95.5	204.0** *

Note: *** p <0.001 ; CST = Chi-Square Test

Table 4 – Lack of motivation for professional development

The lack of motivation for profitable teacher development is basically due to the extra demands made of teachers in the workplace, the lack of recognition and comprehension of social contexts, particularly government responsibility, as the following observations by the teachers show:

“Given the situation with respect to current education policy, I think that what teachers actually do is not recognised, and is sometimes undervalued, which makes me feel discouraged and dissatisfied”. (Q. 18)

“This situation causes teachers to feel discouraged, and this is inevitably reflected in their work.” (Elsa, written account/2008).

“The climate of tension and discord in schools is such that it’s become impossible to foster motivation and self-esteem (...)” Patrícia, written narrative/2008).

“At present, in professional terms, I feel discouraged, dissatisfied, because of the way society now sees teachers (...)” (Q. 141).

We believe that the latest changes and widespread criticism of teachers’ work are the main reasons for the problems in the education system, and this has led to significant *teaching malaise* in schools. The teachers taking part in this study are clearly frustrated and tired, showing lack of motivation and inability (largely because of too little time and too much red tape) to meet all the demands made of them without jeopardising student learning.

“Teachers feel tired, disheartened (...)” (Catarina, written account/2008).

“(...) and it seems not, I end up disheartened and sometimes start to think: perhaps I won’t bother with this, because it’ll mean more paperwork, more papers, more papers (...)” Catarina, oral account /2010).

“Right now, thanks to the hours I work and the bureaucracy I have to deal with, I’m feeling more and more discouraged.” (Q. 54).

This is what is happening in teaching at the moment, with all the damaging consequences this entails for teachers’ professional development.

Conclusion

Faced with the need to respond to the greater complexity and incessant changes in today’s society, teachers find themselves with the uncertainty of their professional roles being changed and having to adapt to new working contexts, in the name of new professionalism.

We can understand teachers’ the present situation in school much better if we consider it in the school and social context in which they work, so that we may perceive the resurgence of cultures like individualism and the birth of others like professional competition.

In school, not only have teachers gradually got to the stage of being controlled by prescribed programmes and compulsory curriculum but they have seen their job become more intense and

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bureaucratic; they are required to respond immediately to the pressures and, above all, they have been conforming to multiple innovations in conditions that are all too often controversial.

Teachers see professional development as a route to gaining new knowledge and skills; but their experience in school suggests that there is no interest in motivating them to develop their teaching practice. Indeed, we can see the entrenchment of professional disenchantment that goes back to 2007, dragging with it the discredit of the profession and social disrespect, which affect the identity of the teacher.

In this context, the success of students is secured by teachers' personal attitudes – responsibility, diligence and interest – which, despite the social/professional complexity existing in schools today – lack of time, too much pressure, mistrust, unfairness, isolation – they believe that it is worthwhile to keep fighting for a better education.

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