



## Conceiving Teaching and Learning Processes: Fostering Curricular Contextualization Practices

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### 1. Introduction

This paper presents some results from a research project concerning **Curricular Contextualization** (CC). This project – developed by the Center for Investigation and Intervention in Education at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto, in collaboration with the University of Minho, University of Aveiro and University of Lisboa, and funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) PTDC/CPE-CED/113768/2009 – is based on the idea that curricular contextualization is a crucial condition for students effective and significant learning, which promotes their school success.

The permanent and increasing demands and challenges addressed to school education require the rethinking of orientations and practices, in order to improve teaching and learning processes and promote the best educational environment possible. This quest for better teaching and learning constitutes a response to the current conception of education as a process seeking the individuals' educational, social and personal development and growth, involving different kinds of meaningful knowledge and taking into account the individual in all its complexity. [2]. Therefore, it is urgent to find better and innovative strategies and approaches for teaching and learning. In this sense, CC arose as a potential approach and a reliable practice option. Though, this concept – and practice – is yet in development among teachers, theoreticians and politicians, appearing to be mixed in, and within, concepts and practices already in use but, at the same time, arising as a new teaching and learning perspective and approach.

This led to the creation and development of the research project, which aims to unravel the meanings attributed to this (re)new(ed) practice, as well as the teachers' practices within this approach and their effects on students' school success.

This paper presents some results and conclusions regarding this issue, and points toward the effectiveness and success of using CC, and its potential as a pedagogical practice to be used by educational professionals.

### 2. Theoretical framework

As previously stated, the concept of curricular contextualization is still in development and not yet solidly defined. It presents a wide variety of meanings and appears mixed with and within different concepts and approaches already established among the educational discourses such as: curricular adaptation, curricular articulation, curricular flexibility, curricular management, and others [7].

Nonetheless it was possible to verify that the several CC definitions found in literature are consistent with one another and meet our understanding of curricular contextualization. The project team conceives CC as a pedagogical process aiming to establish connections between disciplinary content and the real life situations experienced by students, taking into account the students' characteristics, their cultural background, their habits and the particular social context within which schooling occurs. CC seeks to promote students' success and knowledge and skills acquisition of. Its core trace is to establish parallels and connections between curricular/school knowledge and real-life situations, interesting and meaningful for students, which promotes a better understanding of relevant topics.

This conception is shared by many authors, that recognize and defend curricular contextualization as a key concept and a promising set of strategies for a successful teaching and learning process [3] [4] [5] [6].

Also, by stating the need to think and conceptualize the curriculum around individuals, places and cultures, CC can be associated with other well known and established concepts in the educational field, such as place-based education, personalized education, among others.

In sum, curricular contextualization did not suddenly exist from nothing, but has in its basis concepts and theories already established in the education field at its core. It seems that CC has gradually established itself among professionals and discourses, constituting a new – or renewed – approach for teaching and learning, in an attempt to respond to educational demands.

### 3. Methodology

In order to unravel CC conceptions and practices, this project included 2 research phases, one that was more theoretical and one that was more practical.

In the first phase, the research team studied the different meanings of CC, both theoretically, in the form of literature review; and politically, in the form of analysis of policies and programs. Both tasks included national or international publications – of articles and policies/programs – between the years 2001 and 2010.

The articles search was performed in specific journals dedicated to education and curriculum in Portugal, Spain, France, Brazil, etc., and in databases containing worldwide publications. Regarding policies, key Portuguese documents were selected, while relevant European Union guidelines and recommendations were searched.



In the second phase, the team performed case studies with secondary education teachers and schools specifically chosen to meet the project intentions.

Considering the complexity and extension of secondary education, the team focused on 5 key disciplines: Mother Language (Portuguese), History, Mathematics, Biology and Geology, and Physics and Chemistry. This choice was based on two arguments: these disciplines are the professional areas of specialization of the team members; and they are central in secondary education in Portugal.

The data collection for the case studies was performed through interviews. Teachers from each discipline from four schools – one from each university involved in this project – were interviewed in a non-directive approach, in order to understand their ideas about CC, their usual practices within the classroom and the school's philosophy. The interviews were then analyzed through content analysis [8], aiming to unravel and find central features in teachers' discourses and understand if, and how, CC is performed and its effects on students' school achievement.

The information was organized into main categories and interpreted, providing the results presented in 4. Findings and discussion.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

In this section, we will focus on the results of the interviews analysis from 5 teachers (coordinators) from one studied school, by presenting and interpreting their discourse concerning curricular contextualization.

The content analysis revealed interesting facts about teachers' perceptions and practices concerning CC. Specifically, teachers' discourses focused on two major issues regarding CC, both as a practice as well as a concept, namely: *What is curricular contextualization?*; *Why and how to use CC?*.

These results seem to be in line with our beliefs on the subject of CC as a (re)new(ed) and potential practice.

##### 4.1 What is curricular contextualization?

Teachers' discourses revealed that the unawareness concerning the concept of curricular contextualization is more common than the knowledge or conscious understanding of the subject. In fact, when asked, "What do you understand about the term curricular contextualization?" only two of the five interviewed teachers gave answers close to the definition used in the project, such as:

*"It's what I said before, it is to not disconnect [knowledge] from their [the students] reality" (History teacher)*

*"In other words, how can we adapt the curriculum as a whole to the context, aiming for better results and better practice" (Portuguese teacher)*

The remaining three teachers appeared to be in an unknown territory, as demonstrated in the following examples:

*"Curricular contextualization? What do I understand by curricular contextualization? Such a complicated question..." (Math teacher)*

*"To be honest, I thought "what do they want from me?" Honestly, I don't (...) "What does this mean?" (...) I'm not really understanding what you are asking" (Physics and Chemistry teacher)*

*"When I heard it I thought (...) I don't know how to answer..." (Department coordinator)*

We must mention that this question was asked at the end of the interview, after teachers spoke about their usual practices, their teaching and learning conceptions, and the school philosophy. Still, some teachers could not associate, at first, their practices to CC and define the concept. This clearly shows that even when teachers use CC in their everyday classroom practices, they feel unfamiliar with the concept and initially perceive it as new and unknown.

##### 4.2 Why and how to use CC?

Even though CC is an unknown concept, teachers' discourses clearly show that they perform curricular contextualization in their daily practices, driven by the belief that it is the better approach to promote students' success and create good teaching and learning environments.

The following passages from the interviews confirm this statement, revealing CC practices used by teachers, as well as their motivations for using it.

*"I planned the class but students are not following it, and I can in a second teach a totally different lesson (...) what works in one class probably won't work in another. And I have to be able to adapt to students (...) And there is also the usefulness in everyday life (...) It is trying to use Math to solve a day-to-day problem" (Math teacher)*

*"We can give a History lesson in an old-fashioned way (...) or give it based on what is important to them [students] (...) I believe that History only makes sense when connected to the present" (History teacher)*

*"I believe that the visit can provide them with learning beyond the classroom walls, in such a way that they can broadly see and understand" (Portuguese teacher)*

*"[CC provides] equity. On the other hand, I believe it makes learning meaningful" (Department coordinator)*

*"I believe this experience helps us to really reach these [success and school achievement] goals and work with the students fruitfully" (Math teacher)*

In a close relationship with the dimension of students motivation and achievement, rather than encouraged by teaching the subjects' contents, teachers improve strategies and methods aiming to develop a meaningful curriculum.



This approach is also related to students' school marks. This concern is clearly stated in teachers' discourses, in that even with overall lack of time for developing new and better teaching and learning practices, they find the time spent with this method is successful and feel it is worthwhile.

Teachers highlight that this practice is also encouraged by students' participation in class. Many students, even if unconsciously, promote CC practices due to their natural curiosity and interest in all subject matters. This curiosity lead students to ask questions on subjects related to the curriculum and daily experiences. Also, they propose topics and tasks that can promote CC.

## 5. Conclusions

The findings presented above supported the conclusion that CC is mainly unknown as a concept to teachers, but it is a part of their daily practices. Moreover, this (re)new(ed) curriculum approach is due to students' improved motivation, and it is the most fruitful strategy to achieve better school marks.

Although we cannot affirm that this is a practice transversal to all teachers in the studied school, the fact that the interviewed teachers are pedagogical coordinators, allows us to assume that CC is part of the school philosophy. Additionally, it explains the general good results of this school.

Teachers' discourses point in the direction of our thesis, revealing that CC can have the potential to promote a better teaching and learning environment and, therefore, promote students' school success.

Also, the interviews showed that CC is, in fact, an innovative practice, given that teachers are currently unraveling its meaning. Nevertheless, it is an "ancient" process, constituted by a set of already in use practices among teachers that are now being rediscovered and reconceptualized as CC practices.

In sum, we defend the idea that Curricular contextualization is a raw diamond for teaching and learning.

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