The Construction of Historical Knowledge through Didactic Games: An Experience in the Study of the Social Environment with Third Year Primary School Students in Portugal

Adriana Lage Costa[1], Raquel Fernandes[2], Sofia Rodrigues[3]

Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, Portugal[1, 2, 3]

Abstract

This article describes a pedagogical intervention carried out with 3rd year primary school students in Portugal, as part of the Study of the Social Environment. The main objective was to promote the construction of historical knowledge through a multi-perspectival approach, using didactic games and the use of written and oral sources. The data was collected through individual and group activities and questionnaires, carried out during teaching practice by Master's students in Portuguese language, History and Geography of Portugal.
The results indicate that the didactic games, combined with the other teaching strategies used in the classroom, proved to be effective in assimilating historical concepts, understanding local memory and history, feeling a sense of belonging and promoting critical and analytical thinking in the students.

Keywords: *Historical knowledge, Didactic games, Social environment study*

1. Introduction

This study was carried out as part of the supervised internship for the Master's Degree in Portuguese Language, History and Geography of Portugal at the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, with the aim of analysing how 3rd grade primary school students in a Portuguese public school construct historical knowledge through a multi-perspective approach, using didactic games and written and oral sources.

It's important to note that, in primary education in Portugal, the subject of History in the early years is part of Environmental Studies, with the first two years mainly dedicated to personal and family history. However, it is in the 3rd and 4th years that students have more direct contact with content related to the History of Portugal [1].

Following the Essential Learning guidelines [2], pedagogical strategies were developed to promote an integrative approach to historical knowledge and its sources, encouraging students to start researching and selecting relevant information about the context of the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of 25 April.

We considered it essential to adopt an approach that prioritised the use of different historical sources, allowing us to contrast events and perspectives on the historical context in question, adapting it to the children's understanding. We felt it was pertinent to adopt the workshop-classroom project developed by [3], in which the student is at the centre of the educational process.

Previous studies have highlighted how children and adolescents make inferences from various historical sources, revealing the fundamental relationship between this skill and the development of historical literacy [4].

However, for [5], it is crucial to guarantee critical and conscious teaching, avoiding a simplified and romanticised approach to history, especially in primary school, where the limited time dedicated to teaching history can compromise the quality of learning and students' relationship with the subject. The reduction in the number of hours spent teaching history in schools in Portugal has been a point of attention among scholars in the field [1]. What has been seen in Portuguese schools is a somewhat global tendency to prioritise the teaching of language and mathematics to the detriment of knowledge about society and nature, both in terms of time and content, which has been revealed with some frequency in the reports and planning of trainees in the 1st and 2nd cycles of basic education. This preference, which is also reflected in official curriculum documents, considers reading and writing skills to be central objectives in all basic education, and ends up disregarding the fact that text is not an isolated construct, but rather a medium through which various forms of thought, visions and knowledge about nature, society and understanding of the world are expressed, which is also promoted by school education.

The most recent report by the Council of Europe's Observatory on the teaching of history in 2024 found that active learning methods are little used by teachers, precisely because of concerns about the limited time allocated to teaching history in the overall curriculum and curriculum overload, identified as the main obstacles to guaranteeing quality history teaching [6].

Despite the conditioning factors that sometimes limit the implementation of projects of this nature and the development of historical understanding in primary school classrooms, this work aimed to promote historical awareness and enable students to acquire skills and attitudes of investigation, questioning, analysis, and respect for the different historical actors, exploring the theme of the 50th anniversary of the 25 April Revolution.

2. Methodology

Following the workshop-classroom model developed by [3] for teaching history, this study adopts a constructivist approach, valuing the student's active role in the construction of knowledge. To implement the stages outlined by the author in a workshop, we present an organisational chart detailing each of these phases: (1) Lesson Planning, (2) Previous Knowledge, (3) Development, (4) Summary, (5) Evaluation (Fig. 1).

With this work we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How can the use of educational games help primary school students understand and retain historical knowledge?

2. How do students develop a more critical and comprehensive view of history when exposed to a multi-perspectival approach?

3. What influence does the use of written and oral sources have on students' construction of historical knowledge?

2.1 Context description

This work was carried out in the context of pedagogical practice with students in the third year of primary school, in a bilingual public school in the district of Leiria, Portugal. The class was made up of 22 students, 8 male and 14 female. 41% of the children were foreigners, aged between 8 and 11.

2.2 Data collection instrument

To obtain the data needed for this study, we used two main methods. Firstly, we took detailed notes in the field, directly observing the students' activities and interactions in the school environment.

Secondly, we administered a questionnaire to all the students involved, using the Google Forms platform. This approach facilitated the collection of responses in an efficient and organised manner, ensuring that all participants could contribute their opinions and experiences anonymously and securely. The combination of these methods provided a comprehensive and detailed view of the aspects investigated.

History Workshop
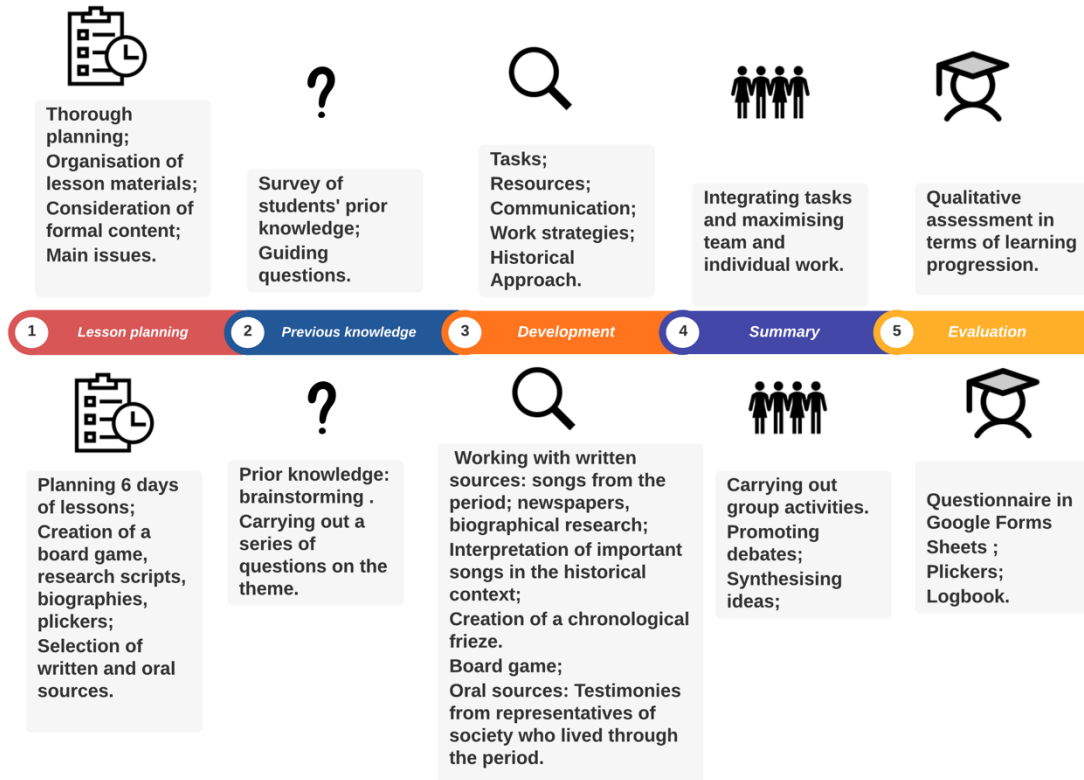**The 50th anniversary of 25 April**

Adriana Lage | May 19, 2024

Fig. 1. Investigation design

2.3 Activities description

The project was designed to mark the 50th anniversary of the 25 April Revolution and was structured around a series of activities scheduled over two weeks of educational intervention. In the first phase, the aim was initial conceptualisation and historical contextualisation using written and oral sources. According to [7], it is important that in the 1st cycle students can develop broader competences that promote the valorisation of their personal, local and national identity, but above all, respect for other peoples and cultures.

To this end, on the first day of the project, the subject was introduced using a time capsule, made from a cardboard box placed in the centre of the classroom, containing historical documents relating to the period under study: newspaper reports on the day of the revolution, posters, photographs of personalities such as Zeca Afonso, Salgueiro Maia and Celeste Caeiro, as well as a carnation, a flower symbol of the revolution. The time capsule was designed to arouse curiosity, create an engaging environment, and promote the students' temporal displacement, facilitating immersion in the historical period studied. The questions that arose from the students' contact with the documents on display in the time capsule were answered by the trainee teachers at the same time as the events of 25 April 1974 were explained. After the students' initial moment with the topic, we asked the provocative question: "Why is 25 April so important for Portugal?".

In the second phase of the workshop, a brainstorming session was held, initially on the board and later on a card, where key concepts emerged such as: "Freedom", "Revolution", "Portugal", "The 70s", "Change", "The Seagull", "Zeca Afonso" and "Peace" (Fig. 2). This activity made it possible to approach some important concepts such as dictatorship, freedom, and revolution, in which the students were encouraged to record the information and research it in dictionaries, websites and

books in the school library. Finalising with a presentation and debate on the concepts researched. The data was collected by the trainee teachers.

Fig. 2. Brainstorming session: concepts

The third phase began by dividing the class into five groups of students, who were given a board game with the aim of assessing how the game could help them understand and retain the content they had developed. The students were encouraged to work collaboratively, with each member of the team playing an important role in collecting information so that they could progress in the game.

The game included a dice, marker pins, cards with multiple choice and short answer questions, and an answer sheet (Fig. 3). To make it easier to solve the questions, search scripts were distributed, with instructions for each group to use their computers to search for the answers they might have doubts about. The data was collected through field observation.

Fig. 3. The board game.

Following on from the project, a video was shown about the book "The Treasure" by Andrea Basílio, with the aim of sparking a discussion about the concept of freedom. The video is a theatrical interpretation of the above-mentioned book in which freedom is represented as something precious like a treasure. After viewing it, the students were invited to express their understanding of freedom artistically on A4 sheets of paper and share their creations with the class. At the end of this stage, a testimony was given by a citizen who lived through 25 April 1974, giving an account of his experience,

and enabling the students to understand the changes and transformations of each era, but above all to understand and grasp concepts such as dictatorship, freedom, rights and revolution.

The fourth phase of the project aimed to deepen the historical content through the language of music. Using songs as historical documents, produced by historical subjects in certain times and places, has been an effective strategy for teaching history [8]. With this in mind, we used the photograph of Zeca Afonso and the lyrics of his song found in the time capsule to analyse and interpret the song "Grândola, Vila Morena". Initially, the students listened to the song to identify its march-like rhythm and its character as a struggle against the repressive system, which generated questions from them. Then they were given copies of the lyrics to read and interpret, paying special attention to the vocabulary and expressions used by the author. The use of music as a teaching resource has become increasingly widespread as it provides relevant contributions to telling the story and the social and political context in which these works were produced [9].

We also summarised the students' interpretations of the song. After the synthesis, a mid-term evaluation was carried out to assess the effectiveness of the methodologies adopted so far, using a Plickers questionnaire (Fig.4).
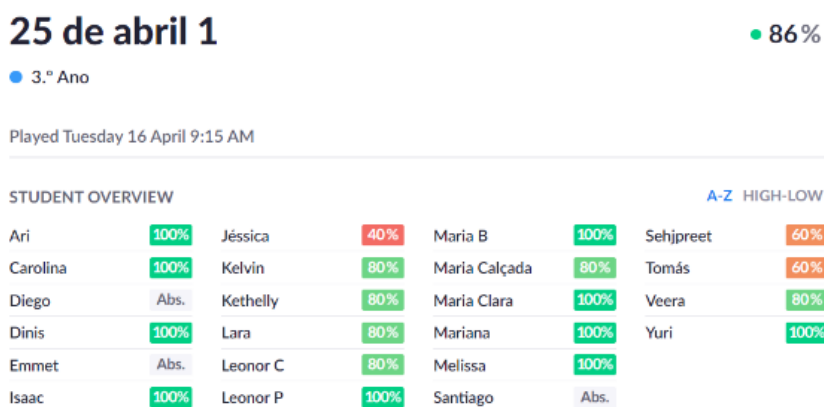

Fig.4. Plickers questionnaire

The final phase of the workshop sought to create a chronology of the historical facts discussed with the students, and to develop temporal and sequential reasoning.

Each group received photographs of a prominent figure from that context and, based on a script, researched and wrote a biography, which was then printed out and presented by an elected spokesperson. In addition, the groups organised five key events of the Carnation Revolution chronologically with the help of dates.

At the end of the activities, the students' productions were compiled, and they put together an exhibition to share the knowledge they had acquired with the school community, for which invitations were sent to the other classes and the teaching staff throughout the school. The last phase of the project, the evaluation, was carried out using Google Forms.

Fig.5. Final exhibition

2.4 Results

This work sought to answer some of the questions initially raised about the use of educational games to help primary school students understand and retain historical knowledge. The field notes and the questionnaire applied to the students showed that the strategy used, as well as involving motivational aspects, contributed significantly to establishing relationships between historical facts and their characters, providing a broader understanding of the context worked on. It was observed that the students understood the main events, and some students associated the history of Portugal with their own history, developing a sense of belonging by identifying and characterising the representative symbols of national history. The fact that most of the students were foreigners didn't hinder the development of the activity. On the contrary, this cultural diversity enriched the learning process, promoting exchanges of experiences and different perspectives on the history of Portugal. The students, despite their different backgrounds, were able to make connections between the historical facts presented and their own histories, which helped them learn in a more ludic and meaningful way. In addition, the use of educational games and computers facilitated the integration and participation of all the students, regardless of their nationality, allowing them to become actively and collaboratively involved in the proposed activity. In addition to this observational data, the questionnaire responses showed that 62% of the students said they had learnt about the 25th of April and a little more about the history of Portugal through the game. It was clear from the students' responses that the use of computers to research the dynamics of the game was a fundamental support component, helping them to answer the questions and learn about the historical context being worked on.
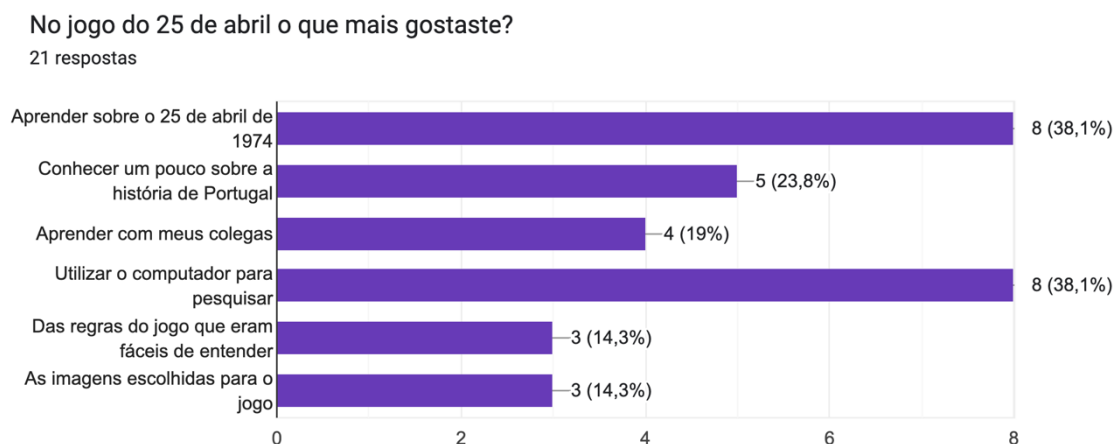

Fig.6. Game review by the students

In the field observations, the collaborative work between those involved in the research process and the co-operation in understanding the questions and consequent answers stood out. Despite the limited use of computers in the classroom, the students did not experience any difficulties in using them and consequently in carrying out the research.
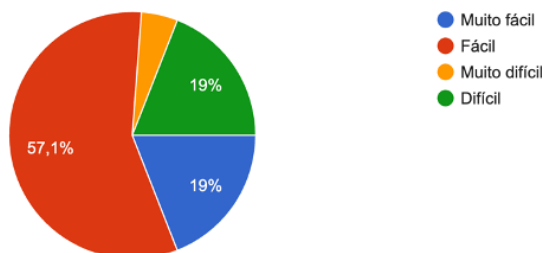

Fig.7. Degree of difficulty in using the computer for the search

Regarding the question: "What influence does the use of written and oral sources have on students' construction of historical knowledge?" Initially, when confronted with a set of historical documents in the time capsule, the students had some difficulty understanding the meaning of each document and realising that these documents told a story. As they began to question, "Whose photograph was that?", "What was a red carnation doing there?", "Who were the people in that newspaper?", and with the occasional interventions of the trainee teachers to explore the variety of documents made available, it was noticeable that the students began to establish relationships between the different sources and to extract information from both their forms and their contents. For example, questions such as "Why does the red carnation appear on the end of a gun?", "Is that the same red carnation we found here?", "Why is that lady handing out carnations to the soldiers?" are evidence of this interaction. Introducing children to think actively and progressively about the problems of understanding time and interpreting evidence favours understanding history as a construction [10].

What about the way in which students develop a more critical and comprehensive view of history when exposed to a multiperspectival approach? Our observation shows that initially some children had difficulty making historical correlations between written and iconographic sources and period testimony. However, most of the students were able to perceive the story told from various perspectives, after all, each document presented told the story through a different prism. This was evident in the storytelling of someone who had lived through the 25 April Revolution and in the way the students formulated questions based on the sources they had previously worked on. The confrontation between the information acquired and the guest's narrative in the round of debates allowed the students to often demonstrate a certain conflict of points of view.

This study concludes that the game helped in the process of developing historical knowledge, above all, as a motivating strategy for the development of other activities, as well as allowing students to understand the chronology of facts and events; that students showed a high degree of satisfaction in carrying out research activities on computers and in a collaborative process; that working with a variety of written and unwritten documents enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the historical context worked on; that some students are able to understand history from multiple perspectives and confront acquired knowledge and new information.

It was proved that the integrated teaching strategies developed in the context of a class-workshop [3] were effective in assimilating historical concepts and understanding memory.

REFERENCES

[1]   G. Solé, "Ensino da História em Portugal: o currículo, programas, manuais escolares e formação docente," El Futuro del Pasado, vol. 12, pp. 21–59, Jul. 2021, doi: 10.14201/fdp2021122159.

[2]   MEC/DGE, "AprendizagensEssenciais" https://www.dge.mec.pt/aprendizagens-essenciais-ensino-basico.

[3]   I. Barca, "Aula Oficina: do Projeto à Avaliação," in Para uma Educação Histórica de Qualidade: Atas da Quarta Jornada de Educação Histórica, I. Barca, Ed., Braga: Centro de Investigação em Educação (CIED)/ Instituto de Educação e Psicologia, Universidade do Minho, 2004, pp. 131–144.

[4]   I. Barca, "Literacia e consciência histórica," Educar em Revista, pp. 93–112, 2006, doi: 10.1590/0104-4060.401.

[5]   A. I. Moreira and G. M. Marques, "Educação histórica entre os 3 e os 12 anos: Desafios para quem ensina e para quem aprende," Educação, Sociedade & Culturas, vol. 55, pp. 73–87, 2019.

[6]   OHTE, "General Report on the State of History Teaching in Europe," Strasbourg, 2024.

[7]   G. Solé and I. Barca, "As Ciências Sociais e o ensino da História em Portugal: perspetiva e desafios atuais," in Las ciencias sociales y su didáctica: pensamiento histórico y educación democrática, I. Bellatti, C. Fuentes, P. Miralles, and L. Sánchez, Eds., Ediciones Octaedro, 2023, pp. 269–280.

[8]   S. Guimarães, Didática e Prática de Ensino de História: Experiências, Reflexões e Aprendizados, 13th ed. Campinas: Papirus Editora, 2012.

[9]   C. M. F. Bittencourt, Ensino de História: Fundamentos e Métodos. Cortez Editora, 2005.

[10]   L. Capita and H. Cooper, "Report on the joint research project on primary school historical literacy," Braunschweig, 1998.