

Balancing Curriculum Regulation and Freedom across Europe



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Portugal - The mirage of curricular autonomy

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Abstract

The Portuguese curriculum policy is rooted in a centralist tradition, which started to be challenged in the context of the educational reform of the late 1980s. The policy-makers' discourse has been, for the past quarter-century, loaded with calls for decentralization and a number of measures with some decentralizing potential have been taken. A careful analysis of the main official documents, combined with a review of research reports, reveals that curriculum policy-making in Portugal is still very centralized and dependent on the prescription of detailed study plans and syllabi. These tend to be followed very strictly. Therefore, Portuguese schools are still far from becoming strong curriculum agencies.

1. Introduction

It is not easy to find global trends in policy making with regard to the countries' inclination towards either centralized prescription of the curriculum or strong reliance on school-based curricular decisions. Some policy-makers move towards one pole, other move towards the other pole. Furthermore, reversals of policy are frequent. Nevertheless, there is some evidence of a slow and piecemeal consolidation of decentralized approaches. Based on a comparative analysis of policies and on research findings, Kennedy (2010) states that, overall, despite the feeling that *"it appears that centralized control of curriculum will remain the dominant motif in curriculum policy-making"* (p. 15), *"some progress has been made in the consolidation of school-based curriculum development"* (p. 16). In a similar vein, Marsh (2010) states that there are promising examples of school-based curriculum development emerging

in many countries despite the tightening central control exerted by central authorities. A superficial analysis of the official documents through which the Portuguese curriculum-policy has been conveyed for the past quarter-century may suggest that Portugal has followed this growing tendency to accept the idea of schools as curriculum agencies. However, a deeper analysis of those documents, combined with a review of research reports, prompts questions on the extent to which such tendency has a real existence beyond rhetoric. In the following sections, different moments of the history of the Portuguese curriculum will be considered. Firstly, the tradition followed by the educational system until 1986 are briefly characterized. Next, curriculum policies developed in two periods (1986-2000 and 2001-2010) are described and discussed. Finally, current policies are briefly discussed and commented.

2. The history of curriculum in Portugal

2.1 *Plain centralism (until 1986)*

The Portuguese curriculum policy is rooted in a centralist tradition, which dates back to the mid-nineteenth century (Pacheco, 2008) and centralism tends to be associated with uniformity. Accordingly, until the late 1980s, most of the curriculum decision-making was unquestioningly concentrated in the central administration. Agencies within the Ministry of Education or other national entities directly subordinated to it issued detailed prescriptions on what should be taught at every level of schooling across the whole country (autonomous regions included). Such prescriptions included lists of school subjects to be taught, accompanied with the specification of the amount of time that should be spent to each of those subjects every week. For every subject, a thick syllabus was usually issued – one that specified, in a very detailed way, the content to be covered. Sometimes the syllabi also included recommendations on teaching methods and on approaches to student assessment. In 2013, central prescription of detailed study plans and syllabi is still the main pillar of curriculum decision-making in Portugal. Yet, calls for more decentralized approaches have risen and a number of measures with some decentralizing potential have been taken.

2.2. *Autonomy as an emerging challenge (1986-2000)*

Calls for a more decentralized curriculum started to become visible in the early 1990s, through texts that had earlier roots. The most frequently cited criticism of curricular centralism and uniformity in Portugal is a Formosinho's call for attention to the inadequacy of a uniform, one-size-fits-all curriculum to the Portuguese student population – a criticism that is stated in well-known texts published in the early 1990s (Formosinho, 1991, 1993), which follow a less known text that had been written in 1987, in the context of the early stages of an important educational reform.

The foundation of that reform is Law 46/86 (later on, Law 115/97 and Law 49/2005 changed some aspects of Law 46/86), which, for the first time, set general rules for the organization of the Portuguese educational system in a democratic context. One should realize that, despite the fact that Portugal had become a democracy in 1974, such kind of law (comprehensive, governing the whole educational system) had not been published after 1973 – a year when Portugal was still a dictatorship. Through its statement of guiding principles for the organization of the Portuguese educational system, Law 46/86, published in 1986, conveys a commitment to the decentralization and diversification of *“educational structures and actions”* (Article 3g). Specifically with regard to the curriculum, this law determines that *“curricula of basic education shall be set at the national level, notwithstanding the possibility of flexible content that integrates regional components”* (Article 47.4). It also states that *“curricula of secondary education shall have a national structure, although some of their components may include regional and local features”* (Article 47.5). In addition, the law admits that curricular initiatives of a supplementary kind are taken at a wide range of levels, from the national level to the school level. Morgado (2000) interprets these passages of Law 46/86 as words that suggest the existence of some institutional willingness to value local contexts and increase the schools' power and competence. In the light of Law 46/86, curriculum decision-making in Portugal remained centralized to a large extent, on the basis of a national curriculum, but some degree of decentralization became possible. In order to understand how far the system has gone in the exploration of such possibility, it is necessary to start with analysing

the measures that were taken in the context of the educational reform that followed the publication of Law 46/86.

The authors of the preparatory documents that were issued at the early stages of that reform remarked that one of the main problems they were facing in terms of curriculum development was the excess of centralism in the decision-making process, which harmed the emergence of innovative experiences that could contribute to a better adequacy of the curriculum to local realities (Silva, Emídio, & Grilo, 1990a). This remark was made by the members of a team that had the specific mission of designing a proposal for new basic and secondary education curricula. In Portugal, basic education encompasses pre-school, whose attendance is not compulsory, and nine years of compulsory schooling, whose attendance is compulsory. Those nine years are organized into three stages. The first stage of basic education encompasses grades one through four, the second stage includes grades five and six, and the third stage lasts for three years. Secondary education lasts for three years. Its' attendance became compulsory in 2009.

The team responsible for proposing the new curricula was integrated into a larger entity: the Commission for the Reform of the Educational System. The team also cautioned that the degree of curriculum decentralization admitted by Law 46/86, including decentralization via the emergence of regional components, could only become effective if responsibility for that endeavour were assigned to qualified agents and if it were supported by a new attitude of participation (Silva, Emídio, & Grilo, 1990a). The proposal for the new curricula issued by the above-mentioned team called for decentralization of the services provided by the Ministry of Education, for the promotion of the schools' autonomy and for a vision of the school as an educational community, rather than as a peripheral service of the State, without an identity of its own. Such vision was amplified by a number of scholars, through the publication of many texts that explored, both at the theoretical and at the practical level, a number of related themes: schools as educational communities (Formosinho, 1989; Sarmiento & Ferreira, 1994), the school's autonomy (Sarmiento, 1993), and the educational project of the school as an instrument for the assertion

of the school's autonomy (Alves, 1993; Barroso, 1992; Canário, 1992; Carvalho & Diogo, 1994; Costa, 1992; Macedo, 1991). One of the most explicit sources of opportunity for the promotion of the schools' curricular autonomy proposed by the team consisted of a new curricular area, named 'Área-escola'. This was a trans-curricular area, which, unlike the traditional subjects, was not constrained by detailed syllabi or guidelines issued by the central administration. It was supposed to be planned by the schools through the conception and implementation of projects that were expected to have some impact on the local community and mobilise content from a wide range of subjects, by exploring the practical implications of that same content, thus concretising concepts and consolidating ideas (Silva, Emídio, & Grilo, 1990b).

After a period of public debate, the curricular reform was legislated, the most relevant piece of legislation being Decree 286/89, which set a new structure for basic and secondary education curricula. In the preamble of this document, the legislators claimed that such reform stimulated local initiative, by allowing for margins of curricular autonomy in the construction of multidisciplinary curricular projects and in the establishment of partnerships between the school and institutions from the community. The decree confirmed the creation of 'Área-escola', which was supposed to take between 95 and 110 hours of the students' time every year, both in basic and secondary education. The responsibility for deciding on the content of this curricular area was assigned to the schools. More specifically, all the teachers of a given class were expected to work as a team in the development of a project for the class and decide on how each subject would contribute to it. In addition, the schools were allowed to provide a supplementary curriculum of a non-compulsory kind, which was based on "joyful and cultural activities", including school sport, "aimed at a creative and formative use of the students' free time" (Decree 286/89, Article 8).

In parallel, legislation that ruled other aspects of the educational reform was issued, including legislation on the schools' autonomy and management. School autonomy was then defined, via Decree 43/89, as the school's capacity to create and implement its own educational project. Three dimensions of

autonomy were considered in that piece of legislation: cultural, administrative, and pedagogical. Pedagogical autonomy includes the school's capacity to create and implement the above-mentioned supplementary curriculum, to design and implement projects of remedial teaching and to participate, with other schools, in the definition of regional and local components of the curriculum. Other pieces of legislation on school organization and management that were published some years later, especially Decree 172/91 and Decree 115-A/98, confirmed the official assertion of the educational project as the most important of the documents through which each school reveals its identity and exercises its autonomy. In addition, the latter decree allowed schools to deepen their autonomy by signing 'autonomy contracts' with the Ministry of Education, with the municipalities and eventually with other entities. The degree of decentralisation allowed by the afore-mentioned measures could hardly threaten centralization as the dominant orientation of curriculum policy in Portugal. Sousa Fernandes (2003) noted that the new curricula kept the previous organizing scheme. In a similar vein, Pacheco (1994) stated that little or nothing had changed with the reform in terms of curricular structure and decision-making. For this author, the reform adopted "*a closed, uniform and centralized model*" (sic, p. 51).

Research on curricular autonomy conducted in that period reveals that the Portuguese teachers considered it one of the least relevant dimensions of school autonomy at large. They tended to emphasize the administrative rather than the curricular dimension of school autonomy (Morgado, 2000). But even school autonomy at large (not curricular autonomy in particular) took very slow steps, in practice. The fact that not a single autonomy contract was signed between 1998 and 2005 (Silva, 2010) is especially revealing. Furthermore, research on educational projects suggests that such projects tended to be regarded as external to the day-to-day reality of the schools, that is, as "*unreliable fictions*", with no relevance to school development (Fontoura, 2001, p. 135). Findings from specific research on 'Área-escola' suggest that opportunities to use this area as a lever for enhancing local agency in terms of curriculum decision-making were wasted. Pereira (1998) described and discussed cases wherein original ideas for the design of 'Área-escola' projects

through a problem-solving approach, unconstrained by the subjects syllabi, easily diverted into additive approaches, whereby teachers of different subjects demonstrated that each subject was contributing to the exploration of a given theme. In other words, teachers tended to disavow the possibility of becoming “*generators of curriculum*”. Instead, they tended to reproduce, in the context of ‘Área-escola’, “*their habit to put a given curriculum into practice*” (Pereira, 1998, p. 306).

In that period, curricular autonomy could also be exerted, to some extent, in the context of special programs that were created for specific purposes, including alternative curricula for students affected by persistent underachievement or at risk of dropout, and priority educational territories, which were set in areas with a high concentration of such problems. Research on those programs also disclosed wasted opportunities to enhance teachers’ competences as curriculum decision-makers, inasmuch as they tended to concentrate their agency on peripheral rather than on central aspects of the curriculum. Afonso (2000, p. 208), commenting on two studies presented at a national conference on priority educational territories, concluded that teachers’ incapacity to introduce significant changes in the management of the core curriculum was emphasized in both studies; the effort of ‘priority intervention’ was concentrated on peripheral aspects: instructional support, school clubs, parties, et cetera. Commenting on other studies presented at the same conference, he emphasized the same idea.

In short, the end of the 20th century was marked by the emergence of strong calls for autonomy, both in the political and in the academic discourse, although such calls were not enthusiastically accompanied by the voices of teachers and school leaders. Policy-makers took some measures that allowed for moderate forms of curricular autonomy, which were used by schools and teachers with even more moderation.

2.3 *Autonomy as the flip side of accountability? (2001-2010)*

In the transition from the 20th to the 21st century, there was a renewal of discourses that questioned the tradition of uniformity and centralism that still

characterized the Portuguese curriculum policy, especially in the case of basic education. Some of those discourses were initiated by top-level educational authorities, which took some initiatives that somehow challenged the above-mentioned tradition. One of the most outstanding initiatives was the project 'Flexible Curriculum Management' (FCM), launched in 1997 by the Department of Basic Education – a branch of the Ministry of Education –, following the project 'Participated Reflection on Curricula for Basic Education' (PRCBE). Those projects were aimed at the exploration of ways of increasing flexibility in the organization of the curriculum at the school level and enhancing schools' and teachers' curricular autonomy. An increasing number of schools participated in those projects: 10 in the school year 1997/98, 34 in 1998/99, 93 in 1999/2000, and 180 in 2000/2001. These figures include some groupings of schools under a single administrative unit. According to the National Institute of Statistics, in 2001 there were 15,669 schools in Portugal, including all kinds of schools (basic and secondary, public and private) except higher education institutions.

On January 18, 2001, a reorganization of the curriculum, based on the principles that had guided FCM and PRCBE, was officially determined, via Decree 6/2001, for all the Portuguese basic schools. In the same year, the Department of Basic Education issued an official document entitled 'National curriculum for basic education – Essential competencies' (ME/DEB, 2001). This document was presented as another facilitator of autonomous curriculum management, via projects designed at the school level and at the classroom level. It was committed to a competency-based approach, included suggestions on teaching methods, and expressed the ambition that its use would imply a reconsideration of the syllabi's role (ME/DEB, 2001), that is, a decrease in teachers' dependence on detailed syllabi as the main guides of their work. Four years earlier, in their first report on PRCBE, the reporters (Roldão, Nunes, & Silveira, 1997, p. 90) had written the following comment on the results of the discussion of the proposal with teachers: *"Teachers and schools seem neither to view curriculum management as their business nor to consider it a priority (...). Having been, in the past, considered mere executors of syllabi, unable to decide what to teach, they tend to be more concerned with their working conditions and*

to direct most of their expectations to the central administration as a provider of solutions.” These words suggest that Portuguese teachers’ mindset has been so framed by a centralist tradition that they will have serious difficulties in playing the role of autonomous curriculum managers that, according to emergent discourses, is increasingly expected from them. A study on FCM, conducted by Esteves (2002), confirms the existence of such a difficulty. According to this author, flexibility – another key-concept of the current curricular reform – is frequently regarded only in the light of the power schools have nowadays to decide how to allocate time slots to different subjects, within certain limits. But flexibility in deciding what educational objectives to pursue, what teaching strategies to use, what assessment and evaluation devices to use with particular students in a particular context – which are the most important issues in a flexible curriculum management – are still regarded by most teachers as too difficult to plan and implement.

As suggested above, Decree 6/2001 officially inaugurated a period when new attempts to decentralise, to some extent, curriculum decision-making in basic education were made, by taking the results of projects FCM and PRCBE into consideration. Before the publication of that piece of legislation, the government had diagnosed the *“excessive uniformity of educational action”* (ME, 1998, p. 8) as one of the major problems of the educational system. Consequently, the government committed itself *“to consolidating a common national curriculum and to supporting flexible curriculum management”* (ME, 1998, p. 10), which should be used *“to adapt teaching to diverse contexts and, simultaneously, make its quality better for all”* (ME, 1998, p. 19). The preamble of Decree 6/2001 confirms such commitment, by presenting the new curriculum as an outcome of an emergent need: To overcome a view of curriculum as a set of norms to be followed in a supposedly uniform manner in every classroom and to support the development of new practices of curriculum management, in the context of the schools’ increasing autonomy. The decree emphasizes curricular projects, to be designed both at the school level and at the classroom level, as major instruments of local decision-making in the context of the national curriculum. Decree 6/2001 also increased opportunities of curricular autonomy through the creation of three non-disciplinary areas

that should be organized by the schools, unconstrained by detailed syllabi or national guidelines: the project area (which, to a large extent, resembled ‘Área-escola’), guided learning (aimed at the development of the students’ competence to organize their learning activities autonomously), and civic education. In addition, schools were encouraged to provide non-compulsory activities for curriculum enrichment in the domains of sport, the arts, science and technology, voluntarism and European issues (Decree 6/2001, Article 9). Legislation that was issued some years later determined that such activities had to be made available for all the students of public schools until they finished the first stage of basic education, although attendance by the students remained non-compulsory. At the same time, the decree determined, in a very detailed way, the kinds of activities that had to be provided, the length of the time slots allocated to them and the characteristics of the teachers who could supervise them.

As it usually happens in this kind of legislation, Decree 6/2001 presented lists of school subjects to be taught, accompanied with the specification of the amount of time that should be spent on each of those subjects (and, in this specific case, to the non-disciplinary areas as well) every week. Noticeably, some flexibility was allowed, according to a footnote in the decree, which reads as follows: *“The school may propose a different organization of the students’ time, in terms of amount of hours allocated to each subject, when there is a justification for that”*. However, in the specific case of the first stage of basic education, legislation published in 2006 determined minimal numbers of weekly hours to be allocated to every curricular area, which represents a step back in terms of flexibility, considering the fact that, in the first stage of basic education, responsibility for teaching most of the curricular areas has been assigned to one teacher only and, before 2006, that teacher could decide how much time would be dedicated to each curricular area. This creation of obstacles to curriculum integration in the first stage of basic education, the fact that the Ministry of Education prescribed detailed rules for the provision and organisation of curriculum enrichment activities, and the fact that teachers and school leaders had to justify flexible forms of organising the students’ time are examples of situations wherein opportunities to strengthen schools’ and teachers’ power to decide on the curriculum were wasted. Such situations

suggest that curricular autonomy has been praised through the official discourse but, in practice, formal obstacles have impaired its development. Besides considering those formal obstacles, it is necessary to understand that schools' and teachers' ownership of the curriculum cannot quickly and easily rise after more than a century of centralism. Findings from research conducted in that period on several aspects of curriculum development support this idea. Some studies demonstrated that the construction of curricular projects, both at the school level and at the classroom level, was being induced by teachers' and school leaders' willingness to respect legal obligations, rather than emerging from a sense of local ownership of the curriculum (Freire, 2005; Gonçalves, 2008; Machado, 2006; Martins, 2007). Research on activities for curriculum enrichment provided evidence of many constraints in the relationship between the school teachers who supervised the activities and teachers contracted by the municipalities to implement them. Such constraints decreased opportunities for the consolidation of autonomous and integrated approaches to the development of that part of the curriculum (Cruz & Machado, 2011; Pereira, 2010). Studies on curriculum differentiation at the school level and at the classroom level (Marques, 2002; Sousa, 2004; Sousa, 2007b) found a persistent view of the curriculum as a prescription issued by the central authorities, which tended to be applied in a uniform way, some *ad hoc* practices of differentiation notwithstanding.

In that period, a regional curriculum for basic education started to emerge in the Azores – one of the autonomous regions of Portugal. Until the beginning of the 21st century, the Azores did not have a curriculum policy of their own. But in 2001 the Legislative Assembly, which is the main political authority in the region, included, for the first time, the concept of regional curriculum in a piece of legislation: Decree 15/2001/A. In that official document, it was stated that the regional curriculum should be understood as the content to be learnt and the competencies to be developed by students on the basis of the geographical, economic, cultural, political, and administrative characteristics of the Azores. As these words suggest, the emergence of a regional curriculum policy in the Azores has been justified in the official discourse by reference to the fact that this region is both insular and politically autonomous (Sousa,

2007a, 2012). Interestingly, Madeira, another Portuguese region, also has these two characteristics but does not have a regional curriculum, although some research suggests that most teachers who work in that archipelago are in favour of the idea of a regional curriculum (Carvalho, 2009). The consolidation of the Azorean curriculum policy has progressed slowly at the formal level and there is a lack of research on its impact at the level of the implemented curriculum. A set of curriculum competencies to be promoted in the schools of the region was officially approved in 2004 and revised in 2011.

Meanwhile, school autonomy progressed very slowly in the country. The first autonomy contract was signed in 2005. Between 2005 and 2010 only 24 schools signed autonomy contracts. Findings from research conducted in those schools (Ferreira, 2012; Freitas, 2010; Silva, 2010) suggest that, in practice, their autonomy was not strengthened. Centralism has prevailed and the autonomy contract has been conceived *“as an instrument that legitimates and stresses decisions that had already been taken, without enhancing local empowerment or the actors’ capacity as decision-makers”* (Silva, 2010, p. 98). At the international level, the growing tendency to accept the idea of schools as curriculum agencies was being accompanied by an increase in the adoption of teacher evaluation and school evaluation measures in many countries. Some authors have interpreted such tendency as the outcome of a strategy aimed at strengthening control while praising schools’ and teachers’ curricular autonomy. Krejsler (2005) views this relationship between autonomy and evaluation in education as part of a wider phenomenon whereby a large portion of the public sector has been increasingly subject to changes. These changes are characterized by a decentralization of decision-making as well as centralization in the form of broad descriptions of aims and goals for public service that are controlled at the output level through quality assessment by a major expansion of detailed auditing and (self-)evaluation measures. As a member of the EU, the OECD and other international organizations, Portugal has been influenced by this movement towards the implementation of school evaluation and teacher evaluation devices. Accordingly, a system of school evaluation started being implemented in Portugal in 2002, under the leadership of the General Inspectorate of Education, and a new model of

teacher evaluation was established in 2008. Furthermore, external assessment of student achievement through examinations increased in that period. Teacher evaluation already existed in the country, but the previous model had a predominantly administrative orientation and few practical effects in terms of teachers' professional development (Pacheco & Flores, 1999). The new model valued ethics and professionalism, quality in classroom teaching, participation in the school as an organization and as an educational community, and professional development. Although appraisal of teachers' curricular work was not very explicit in the model, the assessment instruments that were created in order to collect evidence along the process included some items that were, to some extent, related to teachers' competences as curriculum decision-makers. Examples of such competences included: accurate planning; adequacy of teaching strategies to students' prior knowledge; diversity, adequacy, and accurateness of educational materials.

If ownership of the curriculum was already embedded in the Portuguese teachers' professional culture, perhaps the use of evaluation as the flip side of autonomy could have contributed to the enhancement of the latter. Since a centralist conception of the curriculum has prevailed in teachers' thinking and practice, teacher evaluation could not easily contribute to the enhancement of curricular autonomy. Nevertheless, a strong coherence between curriculum policy and teacher evaluation policy could have facilitated some progress in the promotion of such autonomy. Teacher evaluation has the potential to contribute to teachers' professional development, as long as it includes a strong formative dimension, accountability notwithstanding. By prompting reflection on the distance between the observed and the desired practice and by suggesting changes, evaluation can contribute to the improvement of teachers' competences, including competences related to curriculum decision-making.

The teacher evaluation model that was created in Portugal in 2008 was based on organizing principles that emphasized its implications for professional development. But a detailed analysis of the legislation that supported the model reveals that it lacked a formative dimension, for it did not include any device that ensured the early identification of teachers' difficulties, let

alone the provision of support in order to help these teachers overcome them (Morgado & Sousa, 2010). In addition, the implementation of the model was so troublesome that it is difficult to imagine how it could generate any benefit in terms of professional development. It was the main cause of a strong conflict between the Ministry of Education and the teachers' unions, which, in November 2008, fuelled the biggest demonstration of teachers ever observed in Portugal – 120,000 teachers protesting in the streets of Lisbon.

The formative dimension of school evaluation has been more visible. Year after year, the General Inspectorate of Education has produced evaluation reports that describe schools' performance in key-domains, including leadership and provision of the educational service. In the specific context of the latter domain, the reports have consistently discussed curricular issues. Such consistent discussion has potential to encourage school-based curriculum development, although some research suggests that curricular centralism still operates as an obstacle to that desideratum (Domingos, 2010).

In short, the first decade of the 21st century was marked by renewed calls for curricular autonomy, along with a strong increase in evaluation measures. Simply put, evaluation has both a formative and a summative dimension. The latter was used for accountability purposes. The former was not ignored, but could have been further explored as a source of professional and organisational development in various domains, including autonomous curriculum development.

2.4 Autonomy as freedom to choose the means without questioning the goals? (2011-...)

In June 2011, a new government took over. Its discourse and its educational policy have been based on the following key-words: rigour, excellence, disciplinary knowledge, focus on 'fundamental subjects' (Portuguese, Mathematics, History, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, and Natural Sciences), and measurable goals. The first measures taken by the new Ministry of Education with regard to the basic education curriculum consisted of the nullification of both the document 'National curriculum for basic education – Essential competencies' and Decree 6/2001. The previous curriculum was

criticized for being oriented towards the development of competencies, which, according to the new Minister, undervalued knowledge and harmed knowledge transmission, memorization, the development of automatisms, and the accurate measurement of student achievement. The current official discourse has also emphasized commitments to decentralization and de-bureaucratisation. Furthermore, it has repeatedly stated the following position (Dispatch 17169/2011): *“The national curriculum shall set the knowledge and the essential skills that all the students should acquire, as well as allowing teachers to decide how to teach (...). Teachers should be given a larger professional freedom in terms of how they organise and teach the curriculum.”* New measures also included the introduction of vocational streams in basic education, the introduction of exams at the end of the fourth and sixth grades (Until 2011, examinations were only taken in secondary education and at the end of basic education - i.e., the ninth grade), and the abolition of non-disciplinary areas (project area, guided learning, and civic education; citizenship education is now mentioned in the official documents as a cross-curricular area) both in the second and in the third stages of basic education. In the specific case of the second stage, a new area, named ‘supported learning’, was created. This area, which, to some extent, resembles ‘guided learning’, has to be provided by all the schools but has to be attended only by the students who, according to the class council, need it. The obligation to design curricular projects at the school level and at the classroom level ceased, although ‘activity plans’ for adapting the curriculum to the characteristics of each class are still required. In addition, the power to decide how much time students spend with each subject every week was granted to schools, within given limits.

In the Azores, the regional authorities have proceeded with a curriculum policy whose connection with the national policy is not straightforward. In 2011, the regional government issued a framework of reference that not only revises the competencies that had been approved in 2004 but also conveys a wide range of guidelines that cover all the components of the curriculum. The text of this framework of reference was copied into an electronic book that was sent to the schools and published online in the summer of 2011 (Alonso et al., 2011). This new regional curriculum is organized around the following elements:

1. Political and epistemological justification of the regional curriculum.
2. Identification of key-competencies, both of a cross-curricular kind and specific to each curriculum area.
3. Guidelines on how each level of basic education (from pre-school to the ninth grade) and each curriculum area can contribute to the development of the cross-curricular key-competencies.
4. Guidelines on how each level of basic education and each curriculum area can approach the transversal themes (sustainable development and *Azoreaness*).
5. Guidelines on teaching methods.
6. Guidelines on assessment of student learning.
7. Guidelines for the construction of instructional materials.

As this summary suggests, currently the Azorean curriculum is not fully aligned with the national curriculum. The former values the development of competencies, whereas the latter does not; the former suggests teaching methods, whereas suggestions on how to teach have, to a large extent, been removed from the latter. Yet, Azorean schools still work with the national syllabi, which are still the main guides of teachers' work, and Azorean students take the national exams.

It is too early yet to provide solid interpretations of the curriculum policies being developed in the second decade of the 21st century. Studying them in depth is certainly a new challenge for researchers. Nevertheless, the discourses that have already been produced and the measures that have already been taken suggest that the Ministry of Education is now implicitly taking a canon-based curriculum, made of the so-called fundamental subjects, as a given, while emphasizing schools' and teachers' autonomy in the choice of the means to access it and in the provision and organisation parts of the curriculum that are not considered so fundamental. The assertion of a curriculum policy in the Azores, at least at the formal level, is an interesting phenomenon, considering that it has not been paralleled by an equivalent trend in Madeira, the other autonomous region of Portugal.

3. Conclusion

The Portuguese tradition in terms of curriculum policy is centralist. That tradition has been challenged by many discourses and by a number of concrete measures. Yet, schools are still far from being regarded as strong curriculum agencies and teachers' work is still very dependent on detailed syllabi issued by the central administration. Those thick documents still tend to be followed very closely, even in the Azores, where a regional curriculum policy has emerged.

This relationship between the succinctness of the official documents and curricular autonomy is a critical issue. In educational systems where there is strong reliance on school leaders and on teachers as curriculum decision-makers, the curriculum guidelines issued at the national level are usually concise. In Portugal, a timid attempt to reconsider the syllabi's role and to provide the main representation of the whole national curriculum for basic education in a single document was made in the period 2001-2010. But the strength of the syllabi prevailed in that period and has been even more emphasised after 2011. While schools and teachers operate predominantly as followers of detailed syllabi issued by the central administration curricular autonomy will certainly remain a mirage.

Certain curricular areas are being presented as unquestioningly fundamental. They have been officially declared fundamental and they are covered by national exams. Therefore, teachers will focus on them. They will also be free to choose how to teach them. Autonomy to choose the means without questioning the goals is a kind of autonomy that lacks a critical dimension, for it is based on the assumption that the curriculum is a given, rather than a reality under continuous reconstruction at various levels of decision-making.

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