

Education Policy in Portugal: Changes and Perspectives

Jesus Maria Sousa
Universidade da Madeira
Portugal

(2000). *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8 (5). <http://www.epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n5.html>

1. Introduction: the Revolution of the 25th April 1974

Portugal is a small country with a total area of 91,985 square quilometres located in the extreme west of Europe and with two archipelagos in the Atlantic Ocean, Azores and Madeira, the politically Autonomous Regions. Having a resident population of 9,853 million, only one language is spoken throughout the country: the Portuguese.

The Revolution of the 25th April in Portugal put an end to a forty-eight year old dictatorship, dominated by a political police, the so-called PIDE. After Salazar's death in 1968, the new prime-minister Marcello Caetano tried to gradually open the regime (the Marcellist Spring), but it was so weak and rotten that a revolution broke in the early morning hours of 25th April 1974. Zeca Afonso's banned protest song "Grandola, Vila Morena" was broadcasted on Portuguese radio, as a secret signal to a group of rebel officers to move against the regime. So, it was the army, tired of a bloody and useless war in remote colonies in Africa that led the Revolution. Most of the leading military officers of MFA (Armed Forces Movement) were involved in left wing activities. We can say the Revolution was quite peaceful. It was called the Carnations Revolution because these flowers were in bloom at that time of the year and were placed in the guns of the soldiers. The forces of the "ancien régime" surrendered with little resistance.

But the national euphoria did not last long. In spite of the coherent "three D's" political program, which promised Democracy, Decolonisation and Development, the MFA was not a unified body. Some officers wanted a liberal democratic state while others sought radical social transformations. In the following two year period, there were six provisional governments, two presidents, a failed right-wing coup attempt, a failed left-wing coup attempt, three elections, seizures of land and housing, bombings and strikes, while the country was flooded by millions of Portuguese settlers, escaping from ex-colonies at war. Yet, surprisingly, and contrarily to the expectations of most observers, national political players committed to a democratic system determined by the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic approved by the Constituent Assembly on 2nd April 1976.

So, according to our Constitution, Portugal is a democratic State based on the rule of law, the sovereignty of people, the pluralism of democratic expression and the respect for fundamental rights and freedoms for all citizens. This democratic political organisation is

based upon the principle of separation and interdependence of the sovereign bodies: The President of the Republic, the Assembly of the Republic, the Government and the Courts.

2. Education Policy in Portugal

Having just celebrated our democracy silver age, my idea is to share some information, from the standpoint of a country, which experienced a political transition and had to start from the very beginning in terms of a definition of an education policy. So I must say that the Constitution approved in 1976 proclaimed that everyone had the right to education on a platform of equal opportunities to both access to and success at school. Being responsible for the democratisation of education, the State was not entitled to orientate education and culture to any particular philosophical, aesthetic, political or religious direction. Education was also expected to minimise economic, social and cultural differences, stimulate democratic participation in a free society and promote mutual understanding, tolerance and spirit of community. These overall principles aiming to a “new” education were really attractive for a changing society.

But I must also say that the Education System Act, which established the general framework for the reorganisation of the Portuguese education system, had to wait for 12 years to be discussed in the Assembly of the Republic and be published. The Law (Law 46/86) developing those principles written on the Constitution hasn't arrived so quickly as we could expect. However, it was the result of a large participation of the political parties. Five parties presented each a project of the Law, having all been voted favourably in general by all parliamentary groups. After a long debate of 175 hours along 30 meetings within the specialised committee, our Magna Carta of Education got an expressive approval in the Plenary of the Assembly of the Republic.

So, if we consider that the education policy is the translation of a series of political intentions, our Education System Act is one of the most important sources for its analysis. Otherwise, where can we find them more explicit? In other official documents? In our politicians' speeches? According to Louis D'Hainaut (1980), there are two ways of getting to the education policy of a country: either making a content analysis of those intentions declared somewhere, or regarding the reality, which is much more complicated. I think only both of them can give us a more perfect vision, although never perfect. Just one way to face it will always be a defective strategy.

Following the methodology proposed by this specialist, I'd like to concentrate on five indicators among many others, which have somehow to do with the values, the moral, political or cultural philosophy, that's to say, the fundamental options of my particular country.

1. Focalisation of Education:

The first question we can ask ourselves has to do with the focalisation of our education: we wonder whether our education policy gives priority to the individual or a group of individuals. Does society as a whole matter more than the individual for us? Or is the policy designed for the interests of a pressure group, a social class more than the others, an economic lobby, a political party or a religious group? Or is there a balance between the interests of each individual and the whole society? Or ignoring the struggle among social classes and the tension individual/society, are we concentrating on the human species for our own survival? What is the focus of our education after all?

In spite of referring to the personal contribution to the development of the society, in my opinion, our legislation attests a very strong preoccupation with the individual. Over and over again it claims for *“the right to the difference in the respect for the personalities and the individual projects of existence as well as in the consideration and valorisation of different knowledge and cultures”*. But what we are confronted in the reality is not exactly the same proposed by the Law. How to develop the individual capacities? Are our schools provided with differently specialised equipment? Are they prepared to provide pupils different options in terms of subject matters? Are there individual *curricula*? Do we contemplate an individual process of evaluation for our pupils? It seems to me, that contrarily to the pedagogic written speech, our reality doesn't consider the individual differences very much.

2. Direction of Education

Passing to the second indicator, we wonder about the direction of our education. Is it turned back to the past, to that “golden age”, where everything was always well done? Is it turned to the past where we can find the “best” models for behaviour, located in our national heroes, as examples to be followed? Is our priority the preservation of old traditions? Or are we interested in facing the present as we live it, in solving the problems as they appear to us at the moment? And why aren't we interested in addressing the future? But which kind of future, we can ask. A projected future as we're planning it or an unknown future which, more than contents, it is important to practise adaptation skills for?

The written document tells us the education system has to *“contribute for the defence of a national identity and for the reinforcement of Portugal historical matrix, being aware of the cultural heritage of the Portuguese people”* (art.3.a.). But the same text says this is to be done *“in the scope of a universal and European tradition and the growing interdependency and necessary solidarity among all peoples of the world.”* (art.3.a.). “We are proudly alone!” Salazar said when Portugal was internationally pressed for the independence of its colonies. Facing the globalisation as a trend of future, we're now assisting to an enormous growth of:

- a) International interchanges (students and teachers are stimulated to participate in European programmes);
- b) Sources of information (primary schools have started to be linked to the Internet);

- c) Importance of foreign language learning (there are experiences of English learning at primary schools);

I can say our education policy is turned to the future more than to the past or the present. Nowadays we aren't so concerned with our "glorious" distant past, knowing the dynasties, the kings and the queens by heart... But probably the pupils know them better than they do about what is going on around them at present time.

3. Political Dynamics

The third analytical indicator has to do with political dynamics, the nature and the intensity of the changes the political forces want to introduce. Are we in a conservative, progressive or revolutionary system? For which political model are we preparing our pupil as a future citizen? Or aren't we preparing him for whatsoever? If we are, are we preparing him for a totalitarian, a democratic or an anarchist regime? And when we speak of democracy, are we contemplating the past Soviet regime and Chinese regime as popular democracies? Or are we only referring to the western democracies, either presidential or parliamentary ones?

Our written text tells us about the democratisation of the society and teaching "*guaranteeing the right to a just and real equality of opportunities in schooling access and success.*" (art.2.2.). Education is expected "*to promote the development of a democratic and pluralist mind in the respect for the others and their ideas, open to the dialogue and to the free exchange of opinions*" (art.2.5.); Education is also expected "*to make citizens able to judge the social environment where they are integrated with critical and creative view and able to engage in its progressive transformation.*" (art.2.5.).

Nevertheless I consider that pupils and students' participation on school life has decreased significantly, in spite of the existence of academic associations not only in the higher education but also in secondary schools. Probably the objectives able to galvanise them aren't so much idealistic and political as those in the past claiming for the end of the war in African colonies. They seem to be more pragmatic now. The slogan "No more one soldier to Africa" is now substituted by "We don't want to pay fees!"

4. Openness and Effectiveness of Education

The fourth indicator proposed by D'Hainaut has to do with the openness and effectiveness of education. All political intentions are unanimous referring that all Portuguese people have the right to education and culture. But concerning the reality there are other means of verifying the achievement of this purpose such as schooling rates, illiteracy rates, length of compulsory education, etc. Salazar used to say the democratisation of education would go against the natural inequalities, the legitimated and necessary hierarchy of values in an well-ordered society. "It's necessary to put an end to that legal overproduction of intellectual forces" the Ministry of Education said. (Monteiro, A. R. 1975. 144). "The illiteracy in Portugal is not recent and that didn't prevent our literature to be one of the richest in the last centuries" Salazar supported. (Monteiro, A. R. 1975. 145-146).

Compulsory education in Portugal after the Revolution passed to be provided by Basic Education, which lasts nine years, divided into three consecutive cycles:

- First cycle, which lasts for four years (6 to 10 years old);
- Second cycle, which lasts for two years (10 to 12 years old);
- Third cycle, which lasts for three years (12 to 15 years old).

And how is the access to the different levels of teaching? Is it completely free or is it determined by other criteria as age, examination, cost, political opinion, privileges, etc.? Basic Education is free of charge: pupils don't need to pay any entrance or enrolment fees and they all have school insurance. General support, such as school meals, transports, books and materials are provided however exclusively to the most needy pupils.

Pre-school education is still optional, in spite of making part of the state education system. The number of places available is lower than the number of applicants. Secondary education isn't compulsory either. It's organised in a single cycle covering the 10th, 11th and 12th years of schooling and aims to consolidate and deepen the knowledge acquired in basic education to prepare young people both for further studies and for employment. The access to the university or polytechnics is determined by the well-known *numerus clausus*. A combination of secondary classifications and the mark obtained in (a) national test(s) restrains the will of access to higher education. Talents and vocations are simply sacrificed to the existent vacancies planned to prevent qualified unemployment. It often happens someone who dreamt to be a doctor to become a science teacher for example.

And what possibilities of access to education are given to different ages? Lifelong learning has entered the vocabulary of the politicians indeed. But what have we done other than initial education? Have we stimulated the continuous education, the sabbatical years, the third age education, the adult alphabetisation, and so on? I think we still have a long way to go through in Portugal.

But the openness and effectiveness of education isn't only measured by criteria of access to a determined level of teaching. One think is the access system and another is the selectivity in the different levels. How many of those who go in come out? And how long does it take to come out? The number of years previewed? The number previewed, plus one year? Plus two years? Or more than two years? And what about early school-leaving and school failure?

5. Homogeneity of Education

Through the homogeneity of education, the 5th indicator, we can check if there's the same education for all people. In fact, education is very often stratified according to the age, sex and social origin of the persons to be educated. In my opinion, this is a very good indicator about the policy undertaken in a country. The Portuguese Education System Act has been aware of these aspects when it recommends "*to provide a second chance schooling*

for those who didn't enjoy it at the appropriate age...” (art.3.i.) or when it asks “*to provide equal opportunities for both sexes...*” (art.3.j.) or talks about “*cultural promotion*” (art.3.i.)... The access of women to education is a fact now, contrarily to the situation in the past. Women have invaded some predominantly male professions, such as those related to law, medicine and university teaching in the last decade. The creation of new universities and polytechnics, on the other hand, facilitated social mobility.

The geographical dimension can also be a factor of non-homogeneity of education. Our Law acknowledged Portuguese “*regional and local asymmetrical development declaring this had to be corrected, creating the same access conditions to the benefits of education, culture and science*”. (art.3.h.). Ten years ago, a Portuguese fellow resident in Madeira had less chances of having a higher degree than a Portuguese one living on the mainland. The creation of the University of Madeira (the youngest Portuguese University) put into practice that political intention of correcting those geographical asymmetries.

Another dimension related to the homogeneity of education is the curriculum itself. The question is: shall it be the same for all people, or shall it be diversified according to each one's aptitudes, interests, social needs and talents? Shall it be the same for all Portugal, or is there place for regional constructions according to regional specifications? I think that little has been done in this regard. The strength of a centralised curriculum is still very heavy. Before the Revolution, we used to speak of one same curriculum from Minho (a northern region from Portugal) to Timor (our last colony in Australia, East-Timor, as you know well).

3. Conclusion

More than describing the organisation of our education system (one can easily consult it via Internet) I preferred to present my personal interpretation of the facts occurred under a new political regime. Nevertheless I'd like to stress three main ideas:

1. Education policy has two rarely coincident dimensions: an official and a real one. We can't say there isn't any education policy because there isn't any concrete document on it. From our experience, we had to wait for twelve years until the Education System Act arrived and this didn't mean we hadn't any policy in the meantime.

2. Education policy is always in evolution. Eleven years after the Law was published, it was reformed (Law 115/97) with the introduction of an important measure on teacher education: The degree of *licenciado* is now absolutely necessary for the teaching of all levels (nursery and primary teaching included).

3. Education policy doesn't only depend on the political measures written and published by the politicians. It depends on the role of each one of us, teachers, working in our classes. We can abort wonderful principles the same way as we can give meaning to insipid political measures and we mustn't forget that.

Paper read under the name of “Portuguese Experience”, at ATEE Spring University “Changing Education in a Changing Society”, at Klaipeda University, Lithuania, 6th-8th May 1999.

Bibliography

CONSTITUIÇÃO DA REPÚBLICA PORTUGUESA DE 1976 (Actualised by the Constitutional Law n° 1/97, 20 September).

COMMISSION EUROPÉENNE, DG XXII: EDUCATION, FORMATION ET JEUNESSE. (1996). *Réformes dans l'enseignement obligatoire: 1984-1994*. Bruxelles: Eurydice.

D'HAINAUT, L. (1980). *Educação. Dos fins aos objetivos*. Coimbra: Livraria Almedina.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION (DG XXII). (1999). *Development in the field of education at national level*. Brussels: Eurydice National Units.

EURYDICE. CEDEFOP. EUROPEAN COMMISSION. (1995). *Structures of the Education and Initial Training Systems in the European Union*. Brussels. Luxembourg: ECSC-EC-EAEC.

LEI DE BASES DO SISTEMA EDUCATIVO (Law n° 115/97, 19 September)

LEI DE BASES DO SISTEMA EDUCATIVO (Law n° 46/86, 14 October)

MINISTÉRIO DA EDUCAÇÃO. (1998). *Currículo, Programas e Aprendizagens*. Lisboa: DES.

MONTEIRO, A. R. (1975). *Educação, acto político*. Porto: Edições O Professor.

WHITE PAPER ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING-MEMO/96/162. *European Commission white paper teaching and learning: Towards the learning society*.