Civic Education: Teachers' knowledge and role

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Abstract

Educational attainment depends on a range of mechanisms that affect the teaching and learning process, among which we highlight teachers' knowledge. Our research aimed to build an approach to Citizenship Education teachers' knowledge based on the analyses of several Civic Education teachers' conceptions and practices regarding this issue. This paper focuses on a exploratory study whose main purpose was to understand the conceptions, practices and contexts related to the teaching and learning process of the non-disciplinary curriculum area of Civic Education in Portugal basic schools. The interpretive analysis of the teachers' "voices" resulted in the proposal of a teachers' knowledge framework, based on Grossman's model as well as on the input from other recent studies. We believe that this framework that this framework can help teachers' educators and contribute towards the definition of guidelines for the design, implementation and evaluation of teacher training programs in the scope of the non-disciplinary curriculum area of Civic Education and towards the debate on teacher education policies in the field of Citizenship education.

Keywords: Communication, Civic Education, Teachers' Knowledge, Teacher training, Citizenship Education.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary societies are characterized by the presence of significant changes that affect the way people communicate, interact and relate with themselves and others, and also how they face their own life project. These transformations represent continued challenges for social, political and cultural development of democratic societies, and Education becomes closely implied in the processes that are designed to address these challenges.

The awareness that the act of choosing does not necessarily involve the ability to know how to make the right choice became one of the major threats of democratic regimes (Beltrão & Nascimento, 2000). The lack of political and civic engagement as well as unawareness or uncritical participation in political and social life, undermine the legitimacy of the current model of social and political organization, regarded by many as the only model truly capable of promoting human dignity, justice and social welfare.

Technical progress, social movements and mass communication also contribute largely to this societal scenario, not because they represent *"per se"* negative contributions, but because, among other factors, the civilization rapid pace of change that we have been experiencing has not allowed the necessary and timely appropriation of knowledge by institutions and persons, dissipating important ethical and cultural references. It is undeniable that the mutability of our times causes many pressures and constraints on the structure of our societies, demanding solutions and concerted decision making among several instances. Therefore, Citizenship principles linked with Education emerges often in philosophical and political discussions worldwide, as a panacea to social cohesion crisis and as essential tools for the development of a more sustainable world (Delors, 1996).

In this changing context, the role of education is undeniable: the nations and the world need to ensure that all citizens acquire a set of fundamental Citizenship knowledge and skills in order to achieve the desired economic progress and a sustained social and cultural development. Is the school prepared and teachers trained for this challenge? Are teacher educators aware of the importance of teacher training in this domain? According to Cabral (2000) education presents itself as one of the factors directly associated with active Citizenship, because the more educated a person is, the greater the propensity for the assumption and exercising of Citizenship. It is Education, as a driver of personal and social development of individuals, that has the task of promoting innovative and critical thinking, reflective capacity and the return to the idea of community, in order to enable a sustainable world growth grounded on a logic of human solidarity and social equity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teachers' knowledge and teacher education

Teaching is an extremely complex activity which relies on different types of knowledge and is mainly a multifaceted cognitive skill occurring in an ill-structured and dynamic environment (Spiro et al, 1988). Given the current historical and social context, teachers can no longer limit their actions to the transmission of knowledge and values; they need to assume a flexible and responsive approach so that they can contribute towards the development of their students as critical and active citizens, with full rights and responsibilities.

A teacher was secularly someone who "professed" a knowledge (Roldão, 2004); someone who knows something and whose function is to "transmit" knowledge to others (Tardif, 2002) or, especially in an era where information is no longer the prerogative, someone that makes others take ownership of knowledge (Roldão, 2007). These more or less simplistic definitions cause an immediate set of questions to emerge regarding teacher knowledge and their training, that education specialists and practitioners have endeavored to answer: what knowledge and skills are necessary for the act of teaching? How do teachers learn to teach? (Montero, 2005).

The literature review shows us a consensus among nations regarding the impact that teachers have on students' learning and the general effectiveness of schools (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005). Teachers' knowledge depends on numerous factors, from those relating to education, personality, life experiences, teaching experiences, type of training they had received and ongoing education. According to Sacristán (2002) it includes a set of behaviours, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. Being aware of several issues linked with a contextual dimension is also a relevant aspect for teachers knowledge and know-how (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). The awareness of this complexity in teaching profession, made teacher training even more important, which shall be addressed in the light of numerous components of the teaching and learning process: goals, actors, content, strategies, evaluation, but also contexts, beliefs and values (Garcia, 1999, 2009; Korthagen, 2004, 2010; Sá-Chaves, 2007; Shulman, 1986; Tavares, 1997). Therefore, the need to promote teachers' professional knowledge is recognized as an holistic process and of a lifelong learning nature.

2.2. Civic Education teachers' role and demands

Given the historical and social context described above we recognize that Citizenship teachers of the twenty-first century cannot be reduced to the more or less static transmission of knowledge and values, but does have to take a flexible and responsive approach to changes and challenges of society, and contribute towards the development of their students as critical and active citizens, with full rights and responsibilities.

In Portugal, since 2001, Citizenship Education has been expected to be provided from a trans-disciplinary point of view (a component running throughout all subjects of the curriculum, contents, methodologies and attitudes), but also in a specific time of the curriculum taught by the class teacher, called Civic Education. Underlying the curriculum autonomy principles teachers have the main responsibility for this curricular time and it is up to them to outline the projects and activities that will construct meaningful learning and foster the development of Citizenship skills in students.

Even though we acknowledge curriculum autonomy this compulsory area raises important issues in terms of pedagogical approach and teacher training because: i) civic education is an ill-defined "area", i.e., it is a compulsory time in students' and teachers' timetables (45 minutes per week) but is not a subject; ii) civic education teachers are expected to promote Citizenship competences even though such competences are not clear in the curriculum; iii) civic education teachers accumulate the functions of teaching with those of class director responsibilities (to manage students' behavior; to support academic success and playing an important liaison role between the school and the families); iv) civic education teachers are also expected to promote debate and teach several controversial issues not linked with their own subject domain and for which they did not have any scientific or pedagogical training (Authors, 2010).

Considering that teaching depends on the teachers' knowledge about a particular curriculum domain, we then consider that teachers responsible for Civic Education should be trained or provided with specific knowledge and skills necessary for an effective teaching of Citizenship education. Therefore our research focuses on two main questions: What should be the nature of teacher training for Civic Education? How can we conceptualize Civic Education teachers' knowledge?

3. Methodology

Interested in following a holistic and systematic research to pursue our goals we developed different cycles of research, reflection, training, data collection and analysis. This paper relies on data from an exploratory study that can inform us (as external researchers) about conceptions (what are teachers beliefs and concerns about Civic Education?), training (do teachers have any training in the Citizenship Education domain?), practices (what teachers do in Civic Education classes?; what are the teachers' main difficulties?) and contexts (how are teachers collaborating

in this field?; what are the influences of social and familiar contexts on Civic Education?). In order to conduct this exploratory study we chose a qualitative approach, supported by different techniques of data collection (document analysis, interviews with teachers and classroom observation), whose results we triangulated to chart a contextualized and reliable picture of our object of study.

Data of the exploratory study were collected from 10 of the 12 teachers who taught in the school selected to participate in the study, in the academic year of 2008/2009. All teachers were class directors, teaching in lower secondary education, seven (70%) female and three (30%) male. The interviewees were experienced teachers – with more than 10 years of teaching experience, 3 of whom with more than twenty years of teaching experience. Interpretative analysis of teachers' "voices", school project documents, class curricula projects and class observation protocols (only 4 teachers accepted class observation) were carried out. We will present a summary of these results in section 3.1., which can be found in more detail in previous publications (Author, et al., 2010). Analysis dimensions include 3 major approaches: structural, procedural and conjectural, as we can see in Figure 1.
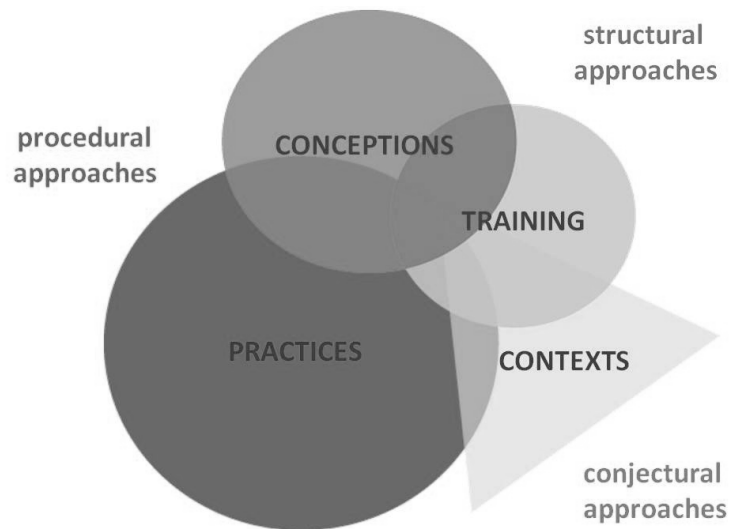

Figure 1 – Analysis dimensions

Based on our descriptive research findings and on the confrontation of these data with teachers' knowledge models (Grossman, 1990; Hashweh, 2005; Magnusson, Krajcik & Borko, 2002; Park & Oliver, 2008), we put forward a first draft of our proposal framework for Civic Education teachers' knowledge (section 4). Our goal was to provide and list the dimensions we consider to be the foundational teaching knowledge for Civic Education and put forward some recommendations for future proposals for teacher training in this domain.

4. Findings

The analysis of teachers' conceptions and beliefs, basic training, pedagogical practices and contexts directly related to Civic Education gave us a deeper view of reality, which we now summarize.

4.1. Structural approach

4.1.1. Conceptions

In general, teachers do not have a clear idea about the purpose and goals of Citizenship Education and commonly do not distinguish Civic Education from Citizenship Education. Teachers' conceptions concerning the objectives of Civic Education are mainly focused on the promotion of attitudes and values – a traditional and conservative point of view – minimizing the importance of other dimensions. The Civic Education main goal is to promote the existence of "good people" and improve the students' behavior in and out of school. Only one interviewee mentioned the importance of alerting students to the dimensions of political knowledge and participation. Related with teachers' implicit conceptions we observe that teachers' speech often reveals they perceive Civic Education as a minor discipline in comparison with other curricular areas.

Furthermore teachers recognized that the majority of Civic Education curriculum time (45 minutes for week) is spent with administrative issues and behavioural problems/conflicts. Considering the impact of Civic Education in students some interviewees argued that it depended directly on the teachers responsible for the subject – "(…) it also depends very much on who is leading, that is, the teacher!" (Teacher D4).

4.1.2. Training

Teachers lack the scientific and pedagogical preparation to teach Civic Education and recognize training needs in this area. None of the respondents had any specific formal training in Civic Education. Lack of training and preparation made them rather reluctant in developing this curricular area. About their training interests, interviewees are mainly concerned with methodological strategies, clarification of the subject's main themes, appropriate practical activities and development of materials and pedagogical tools.

4.2. Procedural approach

4.2.1. Practices

The absence of Civic Education guidelines from the Ministry of Education unveils a conflict between the benefits of curricular autonomy and the lack of curriculum orientations in this domain. Even though teachers appreciate the freedom to approach topics centered on students' interests, some reveal difficulties in managing that autonomy, and feel lost without a strategic plan.

The school in this study, due to the lack of curriculum guidelines, developed an internal program. However, none of the interviewees ever finished the program completely, and some revealed that they never followed that program. Class curricula projects did not favor Civic Education as an opportunity for the development of cross-class projects and in most cases articulations of the curriculum ignored this area; Planning assumes a reactive and informal nature in most cases – "There is such planning if I tell that every week I think what is important (...) it may not be that traditional planning A4 (.) (Teacher P2) – limited in time – especially at the beginning of the year and circumstantial – embedded in everyday school life with the focus on students' everyday behavior. Class observation and teachers' interviews made us conclude that activities in Civic Education classes are mainly focused on administrative matters, resolving conflicts from everyday school life and, to a lesser extent, on the development of contents and projects under the scope of Citizenship.

In general, teachers reveal difficulties in managing time, addressing the more controversial or sensitive issues (e.g. sexuality, values) and manifest lack of scientific and pedagogical knowledge for the promotion of Citizenship. Teachers also reveal difficulties in the selection of materials

and resources suitable for Civic Education classes, taking a slightly positive opinion concerning the use of commercial manuals.

4.3. Conjectural approach

4.3.1. Contexts

Mostly all teachers identify social and family problems that affect school performance and the performance of students and consequently the operability of Civic Education. Some teachers regret the lack of more effective coordination structures and the underlying lack of collaboration between teachers and class directors. According to those the absence of a collaborative environment makes the development of projects articulated around education for Citizenship impossible to achieve in most cases.

5. Civic education teachers' knowledge framework – a proposal

In our theoretical framework we argue that the teachers play a key role on academic success and also on the personal and social development of students. We also acknowledge that the teachers' ability to work as professionals involves thinking creatively, making decisions, solving problems, predicting, analyzing, and learning from each individual case (Moreira, 1996). Therefore being a teacher includes the development of a set of skills that go far beyond the scientific and pedagogical knowledge needed for teaching a specific content unit. Being responsible for an ill-defined domain such as a non-disciplinary curriculum area like Civic Education whose purposes are confused with the school's mission and for which teachers never had a scientific training is a challenge even more difficult to quantify.

In order to reflect on data collected in the exploratory study and answer our research question: How can we conceptualize Civic Education teachers' knowledge?, we used the model proposed by Grossman (1990) with inputs from more recent investigations (Hashweh, 2005; Magnusson, et al., 2002; Park & Oliver, 2008; Sá-Chaves & Alarcão, 2007) and present below our framework proposal for Civic Education teachers' knowledge (Figure 2). The models presented by the authors above are conceptualizations of teacher's knowledge base and made us reflect on the different dimensions that are part of the teaching-learning process and which are decisive for its effectiveness. The diagram in Figure 2 represents an adaptation of those models to the dimensions and dynamics linked to Civic Education identified in our exploratory study.

On top of the diagram are Citizenship Education orientations, purposes and goals, to the extent that we conclude that conceptions that teachers have about the main goals of this non-curricular area for which they are responsible, influence the remaining dimensions and, above all, determine and/or constrain all decision making in the class context. Citizenship is mainly a multidimensional, dynamic and social construction. Therefore, the absence of a clear and unique definition of Citizenship influences not only the content and pedagogical knowledge but also the remaining dimensions.

Despite being a non-disciplinary area, Civic Education has relevant subject matter that teachers need to be aware of. Being aware of the content knowledge dimension is of great importance not only because of the absence of a national program or clearer guidelines for Civic Education, but also because of the lack of scientific training and preparation for teaching Citizenship Education issues and contents, that all teachers interviewed revealed. Teachers' absence of a solid scientific base of knowledge grounded in their curriculum area makes any teaching and learning process unfeasible. Lack of training was also one of the most significant occurrences in explaining the problems experienced by teachers in the implementation of Civic Education, suggesting difficulties not only in content but also in terms of pedagogical approach.
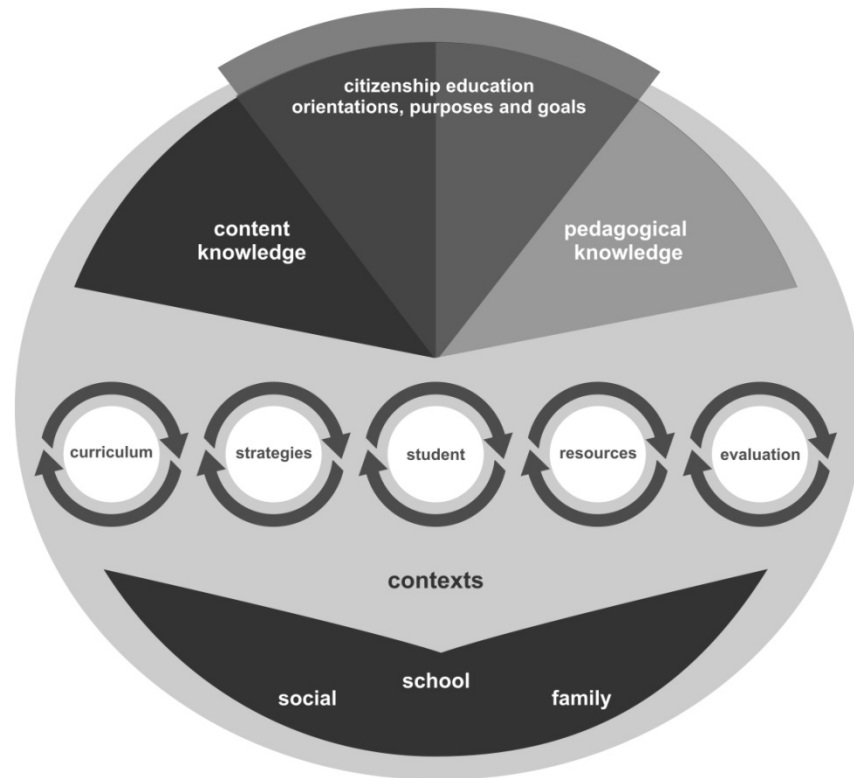
Figure 2 – Civic Education teachers' knowledge – framework proposal.

Huddleston (2005) had already alerted to the problems in implementing Citizenship Education, claiming that the lack of clarification of issues regarding this domain made it open to a range of interpretations and often at odds on the part of teachers who should teach it. Seeking to minimize the negative impact of this awareness, Huddleston (2005) called attention to the need to encourage specialization in this field, enabling the creation of a group of specialists capable of spreading the importance and understanding of the concept, and ensuring mechanisms for professional development in this area through credited courses, guaranteeing at the same time the quality of these training proposals.

Like in Grossman's model (1990), we consider that content knowledge associated with general pedagogical knowledge influences the dimensions listed in our scheme (curriculum, strategies, student, resources, evaluation) that are envisaged in a more particular area: in the context of the classroom.

In the case of Civic Education it is the very absence of a national curriculum (respecting the curricular reorganization principles of autonomy and flexibility) and the lack of explicitness and consistency of curriculum guidelines that stresses the fragility and unsustainability of this curriculum area. Given the absence of a guiding document that will steer, identify and sustain the role of Civic Education, teachers' knowledge about the curriculum is necessarily incomplete and sustained in their beliefs and personal experiences. Curriculum knowledge is also very important from a trans-disciplinary perspective because Civic Education teachers are expected to integrate different knowledge domains in their lessons or activities (political, social, economic and cultural dimensions).

The widespread tendency to use Civic Education for school administrative and bureaucratic issues related to the Class Director's role and the status of "minor discipline" unveiled in teachers' speeches can be explained in the light of the curricular problems explained above, although ultimately, following the assumptions of curricular reorganization (curriculum

autonomy and flexibility), it is the teachers' responsibility to build their own curriculum adapted to the needs of students, school and social contexts. In this sense we must understand that part of the curricular problem of Civic Education must be attributed to the teachers and their low involvement in curriculum construction, caused by a lack of scientific and pedagogical training and/or the assumption of other priorities in the course of their duties (including the tasks inherent to their subject areas and/or duties as Class Directors).

Knowledge of teaching strategies and their application in the field of the Civic Education curriculum underpins another dimension of teachers' knowledge. Considering that a pedagogical approach reflects a set of guiding principles oriented towards a set of goals and purposes, Civic Education teachers are required to promote Citizenship skills – cognitive, social and actional – through a pedagogical approach that makes the content comprehensible to students and allow them significant and consistent learning. Civic Education principles lead us to an area that is more informal and less structured in terms of the curriculum, allowing teachers greater autonomy in the strategies to adopt, without, however, withdrawing its accuracy and importance.

Furthermore, the fact that Civic Education represents a domain closely related to the personal and social experiences of students should represent a pedagogical opportunity, urging teachers to innovate and transform students' real contexts (local, national and international facts and events) into learning experiences, potentiating the ability for critical reflection and active intervention in society. Our exploratory study unveils that in contrast to prior expectations, teachers show little or no innovation in the teaching strategies used, as well as a diminished relationship with the outside world (the local community, for example). Although some of them manifest an interest in triggering different activities and recognize its relevance, other priorities take over (class management, conflict resolution), resulting in the lack of time for the development of integrated projects in and out of the school walls

Our scheme intentionally puts the student at the center, thus seeking to reinforce the importance of student-centered learning, that is, based on their interests and previous knowledge to create bridges between prior knowledge and new learning. Teachers' conceptions also revealed that students' opinion about Civic Education embraced several factors, with the pedagogical approach and the teacher role among the most critical and reflective opinions. Another important conclusion from our exploratory study concerns the axiological dimension of Civic Education, which leads us to state that the personal characteristics, cultural and family of students should be respected and taken into account in the teaching-learning process. These conceptions allow us to reinforce the importance of promoting the pedagogical content knowledge of teachers by providing them with the necessary skills to analyze students' characteristics, as well as the ability to mobilize and involve them in educational activities.

Promoting Citizenship competences also encompasses the need to know different resources available in this domain and their applicability in the classroom. In this dimension we emphasize the importance of using diverse and current resources that allow critical and reflective discussion of contents, as well as tools and mechanisms that enable the development of cognitive, social and ethical competences. Teachers are mainly searching information on the internet to support their pedagogical practices. Taking this into consideration we reiterate the importance of teachers to get to know the available resources (most relevant databases and appropriate search engines) in order to carry out resources assessment concerning their relevance and scientific validity, as well as their suitability to learning goals and students' age.

In another dimension, we place the importance of knowledge concerning the evaluation of students, not only regarding the parameters but also how these are approached. We found in our exploratory study that students' evaluation on Civic Education is carried out mostly in accordance with the aims and purposes the teacher assigns to this non disciplinary curriculum area. Therefore, a tendency to adopt a transversal approach grounded in attitudes and values (in the school and in the other subjects) prevails, not considering other cognitive or social competences.

Evaluation is an essential mechanism in the processes of teaching and learning, enabling teachers to check students' progress, to highlight difficulties as well as to guide future work. In this sense, teachers should be aware of the relevance of their action as regards students' assessment, not only concerning the methods but also the focus of evaluation.

On the basis of our scheme we find context knowledge. To know and understand the dynamics that underlie the processes of teaching and learning is essential to ensure student success. Civic Education contexts are of particular importance, not only because they can and should be involved in teaching and learning, but also because they bring in an axiological dimension that teacher must take into account. Furthermore, our study has confirmed that school contexts are deeply involved with Civic Education, because most of the time of Civic Education classes is used for the resolution of behavioral problems in the context of other classes or within the school. This trend is directly linked once more with the purposes and goals set out by teachers for Civic Education and needs to be changed in order to promote an active and critical Citizenship in our schools.

Also related with the context is the school ethos and the collaborative work between teachers. Absence of collaborative work largely determines the lack of trans-disciplinary projects in the field of Citizenship that could find in Civic Education an ideal area for knowledge integration.

To conclude, from our point of view, Civic Education (or any other subject in the scope of Citizenship Education) needs a solid framework to guide teacher-training programs. Following the line of thought of several authors who over the past decades have focused their attention on this area of research, we argue that Civic Education teachers' knowledge is a dimension endowed with heuristic value structured on a combination of knowledge sources of internal origin (personal reflection, analysis of practices and feelings) and external origin (content to be taught, social context, politics and curriculum, working conditions) (Hashweh, 2005). The integration of the above dimensions of knowledge occurs in a constructive process based on reflection in and on action (Schön, 1983).

According to Park and Oliver (2008), knowledge instructional strategies – or pedagogical approach, as we labeled them above –, concern subject specific strategies and also topic specific strategies. Taking into account that Civic Education may be linked with three major objectives – knowledge and understanding; skills and aptitudes; values and attitudes (Audigier, 2000) –, the pedagogical approach must be suited to the subject-matter (Citizenship themes) and engaging activities or projects in the scope of critical and participatory Citizenship.

Ultimately this knowledge framework and their various interconnections requires the development of teachers' cognitive flexibility, representing a challenge both to individual teachers and to those responsible for their training – teacher educators.

6. Conclusions

Throughout this article we identified and analyzed the main problems involved in Civic Education implementation in Portugal. Our research allows us to recognize that these difficulties are associated with multiple constraints: i) lack of curriculum guidelines; ii) overlapping functions of Class Directors; iii) absence of scientific and pedagogical training of teachers. Considering those constraints, how can teacher training and Teacher Educators responsible for it contribute to the operationalization of Civic Education, in the scope of a more critical and active Citizenship?

Recognizing that what a "teacher thinks about teaching determines what the teacher does when teaching" (Showers, Joyce & Bennett, 1987, p.79) and taking as reliable the results of the exploratory study concerning Civic Education conceptions, we consider that a teacher training proposal has to be based on the understanding of goals and purposes of Civic Education and its role in the scope of Citizenship Education.

Additionally, to the extent that the act of teaching involves a set of knowledge and skills and recognizing the lack of teacher training in the field of Civic Education, teacher training should focus on the development of pedagogical content knowledge in order to help teachers innovate their practices and minimize the administrative and bureaucratic use of Civic Education classes.

Given the relevance that sharing experiences and knowledge among professionals has for professional development (Zeichner, 2008), and since we identified a lack of collaboration between teachers, our teacher training proposal also involves the development of a community of learning around Citizenship and Civic Education.

Further research is being conducted with a group of teachers in continuous training (throughout a **school** year) in order to collect more data to validate the framework presented in this paper.

Acknowledgements

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