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## Theory, curricular practices and dilemmas of teachers in initial training. The case of Geography and History student-teachers of the Faculty of Arts. University of Porto

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### Abstract

In Portugal, the initial training of Geography teachers was combined with that of History teachers in 2008. This forced union has led to implications on the practices and the teaching of Geography. This study intends to explore the thoughts and actions of the student-teachers at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Porto (FLUP), with regard to the practices they use, as well as understand their views about what they teach and how they teach Geography.

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### 1. Introduction

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Porto (FLUP) has provided the initial training of future geography teachers since 1987/88, following different training models. The most recent, introduced in 2008/2009 following ministerial guidelines, made the combined training of geography and history teachers mandatory. Thus, teacher training in these areas has since been offered within a Master's course in Teaching History and Geography.

Research has been conducted by the course's lecturers on this forced union in the training of geography and history teachers<sup>†</sup> and, in this study, we intend to give voice to the student-teachers themselves, examining the practices they follow in their geography classes. The aim is thus to understand how the students regard their classes, what they

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<sup>†</sup> From 1987/88 to 2007/2008, geography and history teacher training were offered independently, although both followed the model established at FLUP drawing on different disciplinary areas.

think about what they teach and how they teach geography. In other words, to understand the modes of pedagogical work they have developed and their concerns as future teachers.

The paper begins with a brief presentation of the structure of the Master's course in Teaching History and Geography and of the work developed in terms of teacher training from the perspective of professional qualification. Next, the methodology employed to give voice to the student-teachers is described, intended to understand their thoughts and actions in the practices they develop. The paper ends with the results obtained and final remarks.

## **2. The Master's Course in Teaching History and Geography from the perspective of training qualified teachers**

To enrol in this Master's course, candidates must hold an undergraduate degree in geography with a minor in history, or an undergraduate degree in history with a minor in geography, i.e., an undergraduate degree in history or geography, totalling 120 ECTS credits, with at least 50 ECTS credits in each scientific area. The Master's also attracts candidates with degrees in the area of the Social Sciences.

Prior to higher education, the history students minoring in geography had been taught history since they were about 10 years old, which is not the case of geography graduates minoring in history: compulsory geography education in Portugal starts at about 12-13 years of age and ends at 15-16, and it can be interrupted in the pre-university years.

The Master's is a postgraduate course consisting of two academic years. The two semesters of the 1<sup>st</sup> year include modules on general education and on specific teaching and scientific methodologies. Among the latter, we highlight Geography Teaching Methodology I and II and Teaching Resources Applied to History and Geography. The module Introduction to Professional Practice (IPP) takes up most of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, consisting of Supervised Teaching Practice (STP) at basic and secondary Portuguese schools, and an Integrated Seminar at FLUP, alternating every week between history and geography. The course ends with a final on-the-job training report, which will link up with the work done during the teaching practice and is submitted to open discussion before an examination panel.

The students are first introduced to teaching the subject in basic and secondary education in the modules Geography Teaching Methodology and Teaching Resources (1<sup>st</sup> year). These modules aim to familiarise students with the geographical and educational discourse, so that they can process the curricular and educational information properly in order to better interpret the subject's official curriculum and programme guidelines. Students are required to master the resources correctly and (if possible) creatively, in order to become better geography teachers.

In STP (2<sup>nd</sup> year), students come into contact with the school context. They are monitored by geography supervisors, and plan and teach 10 lessons in the supervisors' classes in two levels of schooling. The students must plan each lesson in advance, under the guidance of their supervisors, and identify and prepare educational-resource materials to be used in class. Students must also prepare assessment situations and analyse the learning developed by students. The classes taught by students are supervised, discussed and reflected upon by the participants, focusing on the activities developed during class. Room is thus created to collaboratively reflect on the educational work methods used by the young teachers. The focus of STP falls on organisation, management and achievement of the teaching-learning process in the areas of planning, intervention and assessment (educational, teaching resources and scientific dimensions), as well as serving as an introduction to professional development and a sense of ethical accountability. The work done by student - teachers is also monitored by the Faculty supervisors, who visit the schools to guide the students in their teaching practice.

The teacher guidance provided is intended to equip student - teachers with the ability to systematically question their own teaching as the basis for their development (Stenhouse, 1987). As Schön (1998) states, by adopting an investigative attitude, teachers think about their actions and become aware of how educational work is done or will

be done, by seriously reflecting on them. Thus, “by reflecting on their own practice, [teachers] transform it into an object of inquiry with a view to improve their educational qualities” (Martins, 2011, p.128), allowing them to break free from a teaching activity that automatically accepts the daily reality of schools.

Thus, in the teacher training model that has been applied, it is believed that teacher education should aim to “develop a training model that is capable of encouraging attitudes of permanent reflection and analysis, and a critical awareness of the teachers’ own practice” (Garcia, 1999, p.131), bearing in mind however that the supervision provided is only the beginning of training and that students can only be prepared to start teaching. In short, the aim of this Master’s is to develop the initial training of geography teachers so that they are able to adopt a reflective stance and (re)build knowledge in a sound and sustainable manner.

### **3. Class diaries: the thoughts of teachers written down on paper**

When this training model was implemented and we were supervising students in their teaching practices, it became important to understand how these student-teachers thought about how to teach geography and how they actually teach geography.

It was in the Integrated Geography Seminar, taking place every two weeks at FLUP, that we challenged the students to keep two class diaries. Each diary should contain the students’ thoughts on preparing and giving a class. The period set to complete these diaries was the second school term, from 2<sup>nd</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012.

We opted for class diaries as a means to gather data, since, in line with Zabalza (2004, p.13) they “are documents in which teachers write down their impressions about what is happening in their classrooms”. Additionally, we believe, as do Clark and Yinger (1985, p.6), that the diary works as “thoughts said out loud written down on paper”. Writing, by its very nature, implies personal engagement. Thus, “when writing, a cognitive development takes place which is relevant and constructive of thought, insofar as it implies structuring, organising, rereading what has been written, reflecting and modifying what has been written. And this is personal” (Martins, 2011, p.165). As a personal document, class diaries provide written information on what teachers think during the process of planning their lessons and what they think about what happens in the classroom (*ibidem*).

Based on these assumptions, we analysed and interpreted 32 class diaries, as many as initially estimated, following the methodology proposed by Zabalza (1994). An exploratory reading of each diary’s narratives was performed, from which we exhaustively recorded the key ideas on the relevant data to this study’s goals.

As in any study of a qualitative nature, the data and information obtained was organised and systematised, so as to extract the meanings related with the research. The information was processed by means of content analysis, which enables handling a copious, extensive amount of information and testimonies methodically by following certain rules. On this basis, we were able to infer and thus interpret the discourses and listen to the voices of the student - teachers.

### **3. The thoughts and actions of teachers in their teaching practices**

From the first reading of the diaries to explore the narratives they contained, we became immediately aware that, for these student - teachers, class planning and how they thought about them was dominated by their insecurity, anxieties and fears. In some cases, the state of mind was panic. More than thinking about teaching, how to teach and reflecting on their teaching action, the students’ thoughts were focused on their state of mind and emotions.

This does not mean that when thinking of their classes they forgot about the work they would have to do. Quite on the contrary, they planned their lessons with the students in mind, showing an enormous need to please them, as

they ultimately felt it was absolutely essential to motivate them in geography classes. They assumed that they should design the lessons such that the students would build their knowledge, often drawing on their prior conceptions. However, they also assumed that they would be using the subject's textbook in class, since the students expect this, especially those with higher marks. At this point, we were able to understand the dilemmas facing the student - teacher. If, on the one hand, they intend to encourage the students to build their own knowledge, based on research methodologies, they are nonetheless required to follow the textbook's programme, because this is what the students demand.

Proceeding with the analysis on class planning, a notion stands out that the student -teachers approach their lessons in terms of the major programme topics, such as, for example the population, mobility, and the climate. However, they rarely mention the thematic and procedural geographical contents of each lesson. When they do mention them, they do so generically, as lines of reference, and do not specify the geographical vocabulary in a precise manner, such as parallels, meridians, equator, the Earth's axis. It is clear they are departing from what they think about the characteristics of the class they are going to teach and focus their discourse on the attitudes they intend to develop, disregarding to some extent geographical knowledge and procedure.

Apart from using the subject's textbook to plan their lessons, as mentioned previously, the student -teachers also prepare pedagogical-didactic materials, but they are essentially worksheets for students to work on in class and Power point presentations. Although the worksheets contain texts and statistical data accompanied by questions, they are basically intended to consolidate knowledge for the purposes of student assessment and grading. The Power point presentations, in their turn, contain texts and images, but the student -teachers do not explain how they intend to use them in class. They are, thus, classical working documents, repeated in almost all the classes, leaving little room to prepare materials aimed at developing the students' collaborative learning processes. Only very rarely do teachers adventure into designing educational situations and moments involving role playing or enactments, debates or even didactical games and, above all, research that can actively engage the students in building their geographical knowledge. Only a few student -teachers proposed educational situations aimed at preparing graphs and interpreting maps, thus fostering geographical procedures and literacy.

It is interesting to realise from the student -teachers' narratives that they are convinced that they prepared their lessons with the intention of leading the students to build their own knowledge. They assume that they will be drawing on the students' prior knowledge and that they, the teachers, will act as supervisors. But they end up preparing their lessons as classroom maestros, in which the students should comply with the tasks initially thought out by the teachers in a perfectly regulated and orderly manner. Indeed, we were confronted with a few cases, even if rare, where the teachers reported that the students' more active participation disturbed and distracted them. And we do not mean here misbehaving or lack of discipline, but the effective participation of the students in the classroom.

In terms of actually giving the classes, once more, it is the student -teachers' anxiety that stands out. Again, we were confronted not only with the importance they give to teaching the classes, but also their insecurity, their fears and concerns regarding approval from the class. Rather than thinking about their teaching action, they describe the lesson and hardly reflect on their acts. These feelings and actions are further heightened by the fact that they assume a lack of scientific knowledge. In fact, this realisation of the lack of geographical knowledge is much more acute in history graduates minoring in geography or other graduates from the social sciences, than in the geography graduates with a minor in history. But even the latter mention certain failings in their knowledge of the field. And the deepest fear for these student -teachers is not being able to answer the students' questions. They take note of uncertainties regarding the modes of the pedagogical work developed, but do not question their teaching practice, as though their performance had been positive overall and there was not much to improve. They describe a sense of happiness and gratification, because by the end of the class, they were accepted by the students, since in their mind, they kept them participative and cooperative.

It should be noted, however, that there are young teachers who do think about moments in class, about the actions they develop, who describe what they have learned from the classroom context, and actually point out solutions for similar situations in the future. But regardless of whether they described the classes taught or whether

they occasionally put forward a few considerations, there is a generalised lack of reference to the geographical contents to be taught or which were taught.

## Concluding remarks

It was clear to us that more than thinking about the geographical contents they were going to teach and how, these student-teachers show great concern with their acceptance by the students. They are concerned with themselves and their image as teachers. Along with this view, they also focus their concerns on the students and how they are going to teach, even if only in rather generic terms, and have as yet to achieve the state of mind required to reflect on teaching.

At this stage of initial professional practice, the student-teachers are also learning and, in real-life situations, they are confronted with states of inner conflict derived from subjective experiences, whether as students or as teachers, giving rise to dilemmas. These can be related to an entire range of problematic situations which they may have to face as teachers in their professional lives (Zabalza, 1994). The student-teachers reveal dilemmas that are more closely related to their acceptance by the students, rather than other types of problems. In fact, they are at a stage of “survival” and “discovery” in their lives, as characterised by Huberman (1992). Survival, because they suffer from the shock of reality by focusing on themselves, and discovery, because they are also excited and enthusiastic about the task and profession they have just begun (*ibidem*). These student-teachers are far from thinking of themselves as young teachers with the ability to adopt an investigative attitude in relation to their own mode of teaching (Stenhouse, 1987), or of reflecting on their teaching practice (Shön, 1998; Zeichner, 1993).

This study intended to understand what student-teachers think about what to teach and how to teach geography, and based on our findings, it seems they are more concerned with what to teach in detriment of how to teach. They rarely mention the thematic and procedural geographical contents and assume that they want to teach by leading the students to actively build their knowledge, but they plan their lessons based on the pedagogical modes of the transmission type. These students concerns are still centred on themselves, which leads us to deduce that they are far from thinking about the process of teaching geography, with a view to promoting geographical education in young students in Portuguese schools.

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