

Public consultation "Schools for the 21st century"

I began working as a teacher in 1983, so I believe I have a reasonable experience in teaching. As a father of three daughters (thirteen, eleven and one and a half years old), I have the insight of the consequences of our school system in our children and young people. I have worked close to the place where I live and so I've managed to see the results of my activity and of the system in general, in the students I had, that I often encounter in the community. Finally, I do believe that the school for the 21st century has to be different.

I reflected upon the eight questions and although I may not have an answer for all of them, I do have more than twenty years of experience to support the suggestions I'm about to make.

I do believe that there is much to be done in Portugal as far as education is concerned. From the Government we should expect a major concern with quality in Education.

- This quality has to be promoted by a more visible transition between the three steps in basic education and mainly between the 9th year and secondary school, where the gap concerning subjects, degrees of demand and the way students are expected to work is too wide.
- The number of students per class versus the number of lessons per week is ridiculous. If the basic education is supposed to give basic cultural range of knowledge, values and preparing the individual for an active and constructive role in the community, then how can that be done in classes with 28 or 29 students in 90 minutes per week on subjects like History, Geography or Sciences in the 7th and 9th years of school?
- The curriculum has to be adjusted to the real extent of classes. If we want to promote more than a traditional approach to lessons, how can it be done with extremely long programs with the spectrum of a written exam at the end, based on the extremely wide range of knowledge? Of course that teachers, concerned with their students marks, as in Portugal all depends on the school marks you get, tend to be more traditional than interactive with their students, in order to make the most of the time they have.
- Then, the number of different subjects. In the 7th year of school, a Portuguese student can get up to 15 different subjects where he is assessed. What do they actually learn in 90 minutes per week? The number of subjects should be revised and the number of lessons per week, too. I thought for years that the problem with Portuguese students was in primary School. As a father, I saw my two older ones having completely different school experiences in the first four years – Primary school – and they didn't lose themselves. They do tend to get lost after the 6th year. It is in the last step of basic Education that the Government should focus.
- Next, the issue about teachers training in the new Technologies. It should be offered to teachers' quality training not on how to use a word processor but on how to use it in class. Most of the training I have attended tends to be stay in that first step. But to have quality training,

you need funding, and that's another problem with our government, which has been more worried in cutting budgets than in analysing where they are really needed.

- Finally, the physical conditions. There is a Portuguese saying that you can't make omelettes without eggs, how can we have good quality teaching if we don't have normal physical conditions and human resources? How can they learn and interact in the old out of date pre-build classrooms where we have worked for too long? Even a farmer has to plant first to have his results later. We can't expect good results if students have to deal with extreme cold in classes during winter or sauna during summer. And that is a Government responsibility.

In a second phase, there are other issues to reflect upon: I do believe that school has to prepare students for the future, for their participation in the community, so the school subjects have to reflect this tendency, more practical than theoretical. Secondary school should be less selective and wider in the selection of subjects. In Portugal, the students decide their future at fourteen. When they start Secondary school, their studies are too selective: it is clearly either Sciences, Economics, Arts or Humanities. For this to change, the Universities should also reflect upon the way they admit students: the marks students get should be important, but it shouldn't be the only factor to be considered. An interview as it is done in other countries could help us get more adequate professionals and get the exact students that correspond to the profiles the University would be looking for. That should be as important as the final mark they have when they leave Secondary school.

The next step, considering that the school are well equipped is real teamwork in schools. You don't get that just by making teachers to spend more time in school with no conditions to work (you don't have a desk, a computer, or even a decent locker or closet to keep your things – you carry everything with you and you have to take it all home). Teachers need to exchange experiences, to know how others work, locally, nationally and even in EC countries (that where actions like life learning programs are very useful).

Another problem in our schools concerns the knowledge of foreign languages. The skill to communicate is more and more important and the curriculum focuses on the knowledge of one foreign language in secondary school. Two foreign is exactly what the students should have in this phase, when they are about to go to University or to active life. The program of foreign languages should be less rigorous in depth in theme subjects and more centred in developing the necessary skills to communicate. So the curriculum of foreign languages in particular and of other subjects in general should consider more the practical function of the subject.

Another gap in Portuguese school concerns the gap between Secondary school and the professional equivalent secondary school. Students aren't informed enough about the aim of each one because they aren't fairly and clearly informed when they leave 9th year. Also, the professional system tends more to assure a certification at the end of the 12th year than to help to develop real abilities in the students.

About question 1:

One solution could be the teachers' training and real teamwork. Another way to solve the issue in maternal classes is to discuss and develop the pleasure of reading (one of the virtues of the actual Portuguese maternal language program). Maternal classes can play an important role as far as reading habits are concerned. The access to books in Portugal isn't like in other countries. The school libraries could play an important role if they were sufficiently filled with actual books. There is a list of books suggested by the Portuguese Ministry as advisable reading for the students that our school hasn't completed after three years, although some of the titles presented have been bought, meanwhile.

Another possibility of solving this issue could occur with a change in the way work in class is done. If the programs would emphasize the practical issues more, the new Technologies would have another role. Then, again schools would have to be prepared, and the ones I know as a teacher or as a father aren't.

About question 2:

- To be prepared to face this challenge, schools must be properly equipped. Only then we can meet students' needs. Schools in my area aren't properly equipped. Every time the Portuguese ministry implements a new curriculum (the last one dates from 2003) schools can't change their offer. We have to adapt what we have to what is available in the new curriculum. How do you adjust to your students or to the community like this if there is no investment?
- To meet the business needs, it is imperative that students, at the end of Secondary school master the basic abilities: reading, understanding, communicating and thinking. Secondary school should prepare them for that, which is as important as the theoretical knowledge on certain subject.

About question 3:

- It is essential to connect the curriculum and the community around. The professional areas in school should correspond the community enterprises needs. Even if for that, schools have to adjust and change. In Portugal, now you can do that but without costs. How do you create professional areas like industrial chemistry or plumbing without investment in a school that has never had these areas?
- Then it is essential to give students a solid knowledge of their individual culture, the roots of their national identity as well as the European one. These notions have to be cultivated.
- Portuguese schools also lack of background effective structures, with specialised people that really are able to follow the at risk students. A teacher is a teacher, not a proper psychologist, social worker etc... You are supposed to act on good sense but that sometimes it simply isn't enough.... Parents also have to participate in school life. Only with their real involvement, and a proper school team of specialised people, we can prevent the students from abandoning school.

- For these students, school has to work like a second home, a pleasant one that they don't want to leave, so we have to be prepared to give them, what they lack at home

About question 4:

- in Portugal, after the 80's, we had a common general basic school, the same for every one, even a large part of the disabled cases. That's the right way: ghettos have never been a good choice... But, again we need the conditions to do so. Smaller classes (20 to 22), reduction of the number of subjects per year and the adjustment of the curriculum, in the way that teacher can be creative in their work and really involve students. The children from an economical disadvantaged origin are easily lost in a class of 28 (as in Portugal), mainly if you have a bunch of "terrorists" inside. If we loose them in basic education, we will never get them back and they will never reach any kind of secondary qualification. Government has to decide whether they a school of quality or a unit line where students are formatted to know a few things about a few other subjects and as Pisa project showed (I have coordinated that project in my school one year), formation is nor the solution to our students nor it is to any other European student.

About question 5:

- Teachers work needs to be valued by the Government (which is not our case). We need to have the proper conditions to do our work: physical ones, as well as resources and proper training before teaching a new subject (it happens every time the Government implements a new subject – now it's a subject called Project Area, that none knew exactly what it was last year). Simple issues like enough classrooms for the students we have, and enough teachers to answer the students' needs is a simple way to find an answer. A teacher can't be involved in two many things (like the Government is forcing us now) because if he is, his work can't be effective. The Government wants the teachers in schools? Fine! Give them the proper conditions. Check what is really happening in Portugal, not what the Minister says and you'll be surprised (the team from the Comenius project from eight different countries with whom we worked last year were!). Enough rooms would provide the same timetable as in the UK, for example , from 9 to 4 and leave some space for other activities. Here we go from 8:30 to 18:30 and classes have different timetables in order to fit in the available classrooms... In Maths, the calculator isn't the best way to develop calculus abilities, and so on...

About question 6

- Values have to promoted daily in Portuguese schools. The teachers authority, due to laws dating from the 90's have been lost. It's more and more difficult to make ends meet with students that aren't used to respect older people. That work starts at home, of course, but it can more firmly implemented in school.

About question 7

- The Portuguese policy for teacher is surely not the best answer to answer this question. The changes we have been having in Portugal have divided teachers. The Government created a group of specialists in each school recruited from the regular teachers not out of merit in their work but with the points they got in the role they played in school for the last seven years. Please notice that it's not if they played it well, just upon the fact if they played those positions, like Coordinating a Department which was an election position, where, up to now, rotation was one of the frequent reasons to elect someone. The remaining years of each one of us were a complete waste. It's the quality of their performance that gives them the expertise, not the number of points each position was worthing: so you had situations a highly pointed teacher was out while a lower pointed teacher got in just because there was no one else with more points in his school and group of subjects. Is this quality? Please don't consider this experience for quality schools in 2010. Portuguese politicians should worry less with the number, the media and the votes and really try to understand how Portuguese schools work, mainly those outside the big centres like Lisbon, those that often forgotten.
- Teachers must have access to proper training but not at the cost of their families (the Government proposed teachers to have training outside the school hours, like night training, like if teachers hadn't families as well and kids... It is urgent that teachers feel well in the schools where they work, have proper conditions to fulfil their job and to worry about the quality of their teaching, not with the numbers like our Ministry of Education. Teaching must be looked as a process, not the product – conducting a good process will certainly lead to good products. A teacher good working conditions, including salary, to work at his best: in Portugal there a national application now every three years: which teacher with children will work at its best when he or she is at 200 Km from home and she or he has to stay the whole week away?
- Management has to be effective and to look after the school best interests, mainly those of the students and not to work as a Ministry “watch dog”, which the direct consequence of this Ministry policy. Management has to work with the teachers not against them.

About question 8:

- The issue could be solved and the creation of proper conditions in schools: computer aren't enough, even the resource to copies is limited.
- Then, the change must also be accompanied by the families: school can't just be a place where parents leave their children for some hours.
- To adjust to community, school has to have the financial ability to transform and change. In Portugal, they haven't. In my school, we struggle everyday with all of the exposed above, and like that there no pedagogy that can resist.
- Finally, teachers must like what they do. I, as a teacher, I always try to give my students what I would like my children to receive as a father. This is a basic ethic principle we should try to live by. We can only contribute to develop abilities in our students if each class is conceived

for them. Because school is about developing abilities but it has also to be about learning.

School system can only be modernised, if schools are too.

(I am sorry for not respecting the four pages but I had all this to say)

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