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Education Policy Analysis Archives

Volume 8 Number 5

January 10, 2000

ISSN 1068-2341

A peer-reviewed scholarly electronic journal
Editor: Gene V Glass, College of Education
Arizona State University

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Education Policy in Portugal: Changes and Perspectives

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Abstract

The Revolution of 25 April 1974 in Portugal put an end to a forty-eight year old dictatorship, opening the country to democracy. The purpose of this article is to describe education reform from the standpoint of a country that experienced a major political transition and had to start from the very beginning to devise an education policy. Rather than merely describing the organization of the Portuguese education system, I present a condensed analysis of Portuguese education policy, as I view it, making use of indicators of the nature of an education system proposed by D'Hainaut (1980).

The Revolution of 25 April 1974

Portugal is a small country with a total area of 91,985 square kilometers located in the extreme west of Europe and with two archipelagos in the Atlantic Ocean, Azores and Madeira, which are politically autonomous regions. The resident population is 9.853 million; only one language is spoken throughout the country, Portuguese. The Revolution of 25 April 1974, in Portugal put an end to a forty-eight year old dictatorship, dominated by a political police force, the so-called PIDE. After Salazar's

death in 1968, the new prime-minister Marcello Caetano attempted the gradual opening up of the regime (the Marcellist Spring), but the dictatorship had grown so corrupt that a revolution broke out in the early morning hours of 25 April 1974. Zeca Afonso's banned protest song "Grandola, Vila Morena" was broadcast on Portuguese radio as a secret signal to a group of rebel officers to move against the regime. The army, tired of the bloody and useless war in remote colonies in Africa, led the Revolution. Most of the leading military officers of MFA (Armed Forces Movement) were involved in left-wing activities. The Revolution was quite peaceful. It was called the Carnations Revolution because carnations 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.

The national euphoria did not last long. In spite of the coherent "three D's" political program, which promised Democracy, Decolonization and Development, the MFA was not a unified body. Some officers wanted a liberal democratic state while others sought radical social transformations. In the subsequent 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 contrary to the expectations of most observers, national political leaders committed to a democratic system laid down by the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic were approved by the Constituent Assembly on 2 April 1976.

According to the Constitution, Portugal is a democratic state based on the rule of law, the sovereignty of people, the pluralism of democratic expression and 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.

Education Policy in Portugal

Having just celebrated the silver anniversary of democracy in Portugal, I wish to share some information from the standpoint of a country that experienced a political transition and had to start from the very beginning to articulate an education policy. The Constitution approved in 1976 proclaimed that everyone had the right to education based on a foundation of equal opportunities to both access to and success at school. Being responsible for the democratization of education, the state was not entitled to orient education and culture to any particular philosophical, aesthetic, political or religious ideology. Education was also expected to minimize economic, social and cultural differences, stimulate democratic participation in a free society and promote mutual understanding, tolerance and a spirit of community. These general principles aimed at creating a "new" education were eagerly embraced by a changing society. Nevertheless, the Education System Act, which established the general framework for the reorganization of the Portuguese education system, had to wait twelve years to be discussed in the Assembly of the Republic. 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 favorably in general by all parliamentary groups. After a long debate of 175 hours along 30 meetings within the specialized committee, our Magna Carta of Education got an expressive approval in the Plenary of the Assembly of the Republic.

Considering that education policy is the translation of a series of political intentions, our Education System Act is one of the most important sources for this analysis. Where could one find a more explicit statement of intentions? In other official documents? In politicians' speeches? According to D'Hainaut (1980), there are two ways of getting at the education policy of a country: either through a content analysis of intentions, or an analysis of the reality, the latter being more complicated. Analysis of intentions without reality or vice versa leaves the picture incomplete. Following D'Hainaut, I propose to concentrate on five indicators (among many possibilities), which reflect the values, the moral, political and cultural philosophy, that's to say, the fundamental choices faced in developing Portugal's education policy: Focus on the Individual vs the Group; Past, Present or Future Orientation; the Role of Political Ideologies; Access; Homogeneity.

1. Focus on the Individual vs the Group

The first question to be asked concerns whether the education policy of Portugal gives priority to the individual or groups of individuals. Does society as a whole matter more than the individual? Or is the policy designed for the interests of particular pressure groups, one 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 is the struggle among social classes and the tension between the individual and society being ignored?

In spite of acknowledging the contribution of individual action to the development of society, the Education System Act shows a preoccupation with the individual. Over and over, it claims "the right to be different, out of respect for personalities and different ways of life, as well as consideration for and valuing of different fields of knowledge and culture." ["...o direito à diferença, mercê do respeito pelas personalidades e pelos projectos individuais da existência, bem como da consideração e valorização dos diferentes saberes e culturas."] But reality does not exactly accord with the Law. How to develop the individual's capacities? Are our schools provided with a variety of resources? Are they prepared to provide pupils different options in subject matter? Are there individual *curricula*? Do we contemplate an individual process of evaluation of pupils? Contrary to the intentions embodied in the Education System Act, the reality of Portuguese education is closer to neglect of individual differences.

2. Past, Present or Future Orientation

Is the Portuguese education system looking to the past, to that "golden age", when everything was perfect? Is it focused on a past where one can find the "best" models for behavior, the national heroes? 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 what attention is given to the future? And what kind of future is envisioned? A future that conforms to our plans and expectations, or an unpredictable future to which we must learn to adapt?

The Education System Act asserts that the education system has to "contribute to the defense of the national identity and to the strengthening of allegiance to the nation's historic origins, through development of awareness of the cultural patrimony of the Portuguese people." But the same text goes on to say that this must be accomplished "in the frame of the universalist European tradition and the growing interdependence and

necessary solidarity among all the people of the world." ["...contribuir para a defesa da identidade nacional e para o reforço da fidelidade à matriz histórica, através da consciencialização relativamente ao património cultural do povo português" (art.3.a.). "...no quadro da tradição universalista europeia e da crescente interdependência e necessária solidariedade entre todos os povos do mundo." (art.3.a.).] "We are proudly alone!" Salazar said when Portugal was being pressured by the nations of the world to grant independence to its colonies. Facing increasing globalization, Portugal is now implementing programs that look beyond its borders: a) International exchanges (students and teachers are encouraged to participate in European exchange programs); b) access to world-wide repositories of information (primary schools have started to become linked to the internet); and c) emphasis on foreign language instruction (there are now instances of English teaching in primary schools). Portuguese education policy is oriented to the future more than to the past or the present. The schools are no longer focused on a "glorious" distant past, memorizing the dynasties, and the kings and queens.

3. Political Dynamics

D'Hainaut's third analytic indicator has to do with political dynamics, the nature and the intensity of the changes the political forces want to introduce into the education system. Do they seek a conservative, progressive or revolutionary system? For which political system are we preparing our pupils to be participants? Or are they not being prepared for political participation at all? Are they being prepared for a totalitarian, a democratic or an anarchist regime? And when "democracy" is spoken of, is it the popular democracies of the past Soviet regime or the contemporary Chinese regime? Or is reference made only to western democracies, either presidential or parliamentary? The Education System Act speaks of democratization of society and teaching that guarantees "the right to a just and effective equality of opportunity for access to and success in school." Education is expected to "promote the development of a democratic and pluralistic spirit, that respects others and their ideas, and is open to dialogue and a free exchange of opinions." Education is also expected to "form citizens capable of judging with a critical and creative spirit the social milieu of which they are part and to strive for its progressive transformation." ["...o direito a uma justa e efectiva igualdade de oportunidades no acesso e sucesso escolares." "...promover o desenvolvimento do espírito democrático e pluralista, respeitador dos outros e das suas ideias, aberto ao diálogo e à livre troca de opiniões" (art.2.5.). "...formar cidadãos capazes de julgarem com espírito crítico e criativo o meio social em que se integram e de se empenharem na sua transformação progressiva." (art.2.5.).]

Nevertheless, students' participation in school life has decreased significantly, in spite of the existence of academic associations in higher education and also in secondary schools. Perhaps, contemporary issues simply do not galvanize them to action as did those in the past when the end of war in the African colonies was a popular student cause. Students appear to be more pragmatic now. The slogan "Not one more soldier to Africa" has been replaced by "No more 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 in accord in this respect, referring

to the fact that all Portuguese people should have the right to education and culture. But the reality of attaining this goal is seen in the schooling rates, illiteracy rates, length of compulsory education, and the like. Salazar used to say the democratization of education would go against "natural inequalities," the legitimated and necessary hierarchy of values and persons in an well-ordered society. "It's necessary to put an end to the legal overproduction of intellectual forces" the Ministry of Education said. (Monteiro, A. R. 1975. 144). "Illiteracy in Portugal is not recent and nor did it prevent our literature from becoming one of the richest in past centuries" Salazar proclaimed. (Monteiro, A. R. 1975. 145-146).

Compulsory education in Portugal after the Revolution took the form of a program of Basic Education, which lasts nine years, divided into three consecutive cycles: a) First cycle, which lasts for four years (6 to 10 years old); b) Second cycle, which lasts for two years (10 to 12 years old); c) Third cycle, which lasts for three years (12 to 15 years old). Basic Education is free of charge: pupils don't need to pay any entrance or enrollment fees and they all have school insurance. General support, such as school meals, transports, books and materials are provided only to the most needy pupils.

Pre-school education is still optional, in spite of being part of the state education system. The number of places available is less than the number of applicants. Secondary education is also not compulsory. It is organized 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. Access to the university or polytechnic colleges is determined by the well-known *numerus clausus*. A combination of secondary grades and performance on a national test is used to decide entrance to higher education. Talents and interests are simply ignored or subordinated to the need to balance supply and demand for occupations. It often happens that a student who dreamed of becoming a doctor is trained as a science teacher instead. And what possibilities for access to education exist for older, non-traditional students? "Lifelong learning" has entered the vocabulary of politicians. But what has been done other than traditional education? Has anyone begun to experiment with continuous education, sabbaticals, the adult literacy, and the like? Portugal has a long way to go to achieve a meaningful education system for non-traditional students.

But openness and effectiveness of education is not only measured by criteria of access to a particular level of schooling. How many of those who enroll ever graduate? And how long does it take to complete each level of schooling? And what about early school-leaving and school failure? Little is known about any of these features of the education system.

5. Homogeneity of Education

By the "homogeneity of the education system"—D'Hainaut's fifth indicator—we mean whether the same quality education is available 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, the Portuguese education system measures up well in this respect. The Portuguese Education System Act was acutely aware of these considerations when it recommended the goal of providing "a school system with a second opportunity for those who did not take advantage of opportunities at the appropriate age." (art.3.i.) or when it promised "to assure equality of opportunities for both sexes. . ." (art.3.j.) or when it referred to "cultural promotion." ["...uma escolaridade de segunda oportunidade aos que dela não usufruíram na idade própria..." (art.3.i.) The access of women to education is a fact now, contrary to the situation in the past. In the

last decade, women have entered some predominantly male professions, such as those related to law, medicine and university teaching. The creation of new universities and polytechnic colleges has also promoted social mobility for disadvantaged groups.

Geography can also affect the equality of schooling. The Education System Act acknowledged that Portugal's "unevenness of regional and local development should be corrected, which should enhance in all regions of the country equal access to the benefits of education, culture, and science." ["...assimetrias de desenvolvimento regional e local a serem corrigidas, devendo incrementar em todas as regiões do País a igualdade no acesso aos benefícios da educação, da cultura e da ciência". (art.3.h.)]. Ten years ago, a Portuguese resident of Madeira had less chances of having a higher degree than a Portuguese citizen living on the mainland. The creation of the University of Madeira (the youngest Portuguese University) made real the political intention of correcting such geographic inequities. Another dimension of the homogeneity of education is the curriculum itself. Shall it be the same for all people, or shall it be diversified according to each person's aptitudes, interests, social needs and talents? Shall it be the same for all Portugal, or is there a place for regional variations according to regional needs? Little has been done in this regard. The nation's curriculum is still heavily centralized. Before the Revolution, one spoke of one uniform curriculum from Minho (a northern region from Portugal) to Timor. One curriculum remains too much the reality today.

Conclusion

Rather than merely describing the organisation of the Portuguese education system, I have instead presented my interpretation of the system built by the new political regime. By contrasting intentions and reality, we learn at least three things about how policy shapes the education system:

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. Portugal waited twelve years for the Education System Act to be written; this did not mean it lacked an education policy in the meantime.
2. Education policy is always in evolution. Eleven years after the Law was published, it was rewritten (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 does not only depend on the pronouncements of politicians. It depends on the efforts of each of us—administrators, professors, teachers—in our day- to-day work. We can corrupt wonderful principles or we can give real meaning even to insipid political pronouncements.

Notes

1. This article was presented under the name "Portuguese Experience," at the ATEE Spring Conference "Changing Education in a Changing Society", at Klaipeda University, Lithuania, May, 1999.
2. The Editor thanks Alfinio Flores for translations of selected portions of the Education System Act.

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