Curricular contextualization: a look at administrators’ points of view
We assume that curricular contextualization promotes curricular justice (Connell, 1993) and favors better learning for students. Therefore, it contributes to a more socially fair education.

Thus, it ought to be valued in school education

We believe that the way schools set up and develop the curriculum is strongly influenced by the aspects that are valued in their institutional evaluation.

What value is given to curricular contextualization in the schools assessment?

What value does curricular contextualization have in the schools’ scores?
The general objective of this presentation is to analyze the ways in which aspects associated to curricular contextualization are present in the external evaluation of primary and secondary schools in Portugal.

This study aims to establish relations between the scores attributed by the GIE and the enunciation made on the reports about the presence or absence of curricular contextualization processes.
We had the hypothesis that the effort of curricular contextualization, even if not explicit, constitutes a way of justifying the best scores attributed to schools by the GIE in their external assessment process.

In order to test the hypothesis, we used the assessment referential applied by the GIE and the reports that justified the scores attributed in domains related to curricular contextualization.

These reports were chosen according to the application of two cumulative criteria: the geographic dispersion of the schools, and the score attributed by the GIE in one of the 5 domains present in the evaluation referential (“provision of educational services”).
Methodology

First, we identified descriptors related to curricular contextualization that are used by the GIE in their assessment.

Secondly, 14 descriptors identified were cross matched with the four dimensions revised in the literature associated with this concept: i) the location as a contextualization reference; ii) the student as a contextualization reference; iii) the pedagogical practice as a contextualization reference, iv) and the contents of subject knowledge as a contextualization reference.

Thirdly, 20 out of the 300 reports produced by GIE relative to the schools assessed in 2009-2010 were selected.

We used content analysis (Bardin, 1991) to interpret the data of the reports.
1- Meanings of contextualisation in the referential of school external assessment, followed by GIE

The concept of contextualization, in the sense given in the referential followed by the GIE for the external assessment of schools, is present in the domain of the "provision of the educational service", when attention is given either to the "differentiation and support," or the "scope of the curriculum and the enhancement of knowledge and learning".

In the 20 reports, we analyzed the existence of situations of curricular contextualization crossing with the four dimensions that we found in the literature review: the disciplinary knowledge content, the location, the student, and the pedagogical practices.
3 - Attributed meanings of curricular contextualization present in GIE reports and their relation with theoretical perspectives from literature reviews

3.1 - The disciplinary knowledge content as reference for curricular contextualization

- Generally, the reports justify the valuation and the existence of management and curricular articulation processes, even if they are mostly circumscribed to curricular departments;
- In the majority of the reports, the existence of references to teachers articulation processes are limited to curricular departments or disciplinary groups;
- From the analysis, we also found the presence of indicators pointing towards cooperative work practices between teachers, in planning activities as well as in monitoring these activities;
- It seems there is a perception of a type of training that stimulates the students to have new learning experiences.

In summary, according to GIE evaluations, there are management and curriculum articulation processes in the school clusters addressed in the 20 analyzed reports. However, given the used discourse, it is not possible to confirm the idea that curricular contextualization is based on disciplinary content.
3.2 - **The location as reference for curricular contextualization**

- In an explicit way, all reports present evidence that show the **attention paid to the integration of cultural and social dimensions in the curriculum**. These dimensions are realized, mostly, through the informal curriculum, with extracurricular activities (projects, clubs, library, ...)

Considering the dimension in analysis and the presented data, **it is not possible to conclude the idea that location is a basis for curriculum contextualization intentionally planned by these schools.**

The discourses in the reports reveal that **social and cultural dimensions**, as well as some experimental activities, **are incorporated in students’ education**. It seems that **the intention is to extend the formative experiences more than to promote the contextualization of curriculum** as declared by Yamauchi (2003) and Gillespie (2002). This is, as a process that stimulates the student to learn in a meaningful way, in relation to “real life contexts”.
One of the most referred to procedures was the production of **instruments for diagnostic evaluation**. It is a common dimension and it aims to know better the students for whom the work is developed.

In general, the **attention** drawn to the **students with special needs** is a reality in many Portuguese schools.

**Finally**, in relation to how this **pedagogical differentiation** is performed, we concluded that it is usually through diverse work materials and strategies to **engage students** in the presented learning activities.

Also, we found that although the **educational offer is diversified**, it does not always match students’ expectations and this constituted a differentiating aspect in the GIE score. In fact, although the diversified offer is related to students’ satisfaction, GIE gave a better score to situations in which the offer does not match the students’ interests.
3.4 - The **pedagogical practices** as reference for curricular contextualization

- **A first look** reveals that conjoint work between teachers on the curricular orientations and programs is a key factor in the score of the school clusters.

A **second look** reveals that the **schools able to conduct successful articulation work**, at an organizational level, are the ones where the idea of **curricular contextualization is stronger**.

The **last aspect**, “**attention to equity and justice matters**”, allows us to conclude on pedagogical practices that promote curricular justice, previously argued theoretically.

When the GIE considers that the **school clusters pay attention to equity matters**, shown by the actions of the responsible, the **score is higher**. To achieve these higher scores, certain aspects are valued, such as the **existence of a heterogeneous social composition** and ethnic and linguistic diversity, as main features of the population of the school cluster.

In general, the **GIE highlights this aspect**, recognizing that all **school clusters pay attention to matters of justice**, providing an educational offer and support, in order to ensure equity to all students, through positive discrimination.
Conclusions

- **Curricular contextualization**, seen as a process that enables attendance to students’ distinct abilities and to promote a *personalized pedagogy* (Crick, 2009), is not an explicit reference in GIE evaluation of schools. The expression itself is absent in GIE referential to evaluation and, consequently, from the reports;

- In the cases when we considered that the GIE reference points to curricular contextualization opportunities, it seems that it is not settled towards the creation of a meaningful curriculum, from the students’ points of view.

- **In the reports** where a relation between offer diversification and student satisfaction is expressed, we **found that a better score** is given to the domain of “provision of educational service”, in comparison to other reports where that reference is not present;

- **All reports**, in a more or less explicit way, present evidence that show attention to the integration of cultural and social dimensions in curriculum;

- The **reference to organizational dimensions of combined work**, able to ensure the curricular articulation, appears to be central in **all reports**. This reveals that the GIE greatly values these aspects.

- Reports of school clusters that received a **score of Good and Very Good** present explicit elements about **curricular articulation processes and interdisciplinarity**, unlike the ones classified with a score of Sufficient.
References


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