

## School's Images: Students' Perceptions about Teaching and Learning in the Geography

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**Abstract:** The present study is based on the changes in curriculum reorganization of basic education. It values a new model of teaching and learning and it considers teachers as supervisors, in order to achieve students' integral development and education for citizenship. Thus, the overall goal is to investigate how students perceive the 9th grade curriculum organization of teaching and learning Geography, in connection with motivation and academic success. In the survey, conducted in a public school, we used a quantitative methodology, applying a questionnaire. The results show that respondents consider the issues worked, actual and interesting. Although they have different perceptions, regarding the organization of the teaching and learning process of Geography, they consensually value the teacher's role in the classroom. However, they show some distance in relation to curriculum organization. We conclude that students have the perception of the teacher's influence and orientation in the classroom, for a differentiated management of Geography curriculum, enhancing motivation and interpersonal interaction.

**Key words:** curriculum, teaching and learning, differentiated management, geography

### 1. Introduction

The curricular reorganization of basic education (Decree-Law No. 139/2012 of 5 July) led to changes that brought the need for a new teacher model and new teaching and learning techniques, based on the student and the development of skills and competencies. At the end of basic education, society expects young people to be autonomous, critics and to have an active roll in the community. The implementation of the curriculum in the classroom is influenced both by social representations of teachers or students. In fact, the way students see the school and represent the teacher influences their behavior in school, and therefore, their educational success. Social representations are important indicators that are reflected in the daily practice of teachers and students, affecting their attitudes and forms of intervention (Moscovici, 2000; Jodelet, 2002). Social representations have the function, according to Vala (2006, p. 482), the orientation of behavior for the action and, therefore, "the relationship between representation and action supposes the conception of the subject as an actor." Therefore, the central actors are students, on the assumption of a shared construction of the curriculum in the classroom, in a

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given context of climate and school culture (Pinar et al., 1996).

Thus, this article aims to present an overview of the analysis made in the context of a quantitative nature study carried out in a public school on the perceptions of students on teaching and learning in geography discipline. Having the curricular analysis and differentiated management in the aforementioned discipline based, it will be presented the analysis and discussion of the results of a survey questionnaire applied to all students in 9th grade attending Geography discipline of the school.

## **2. School's Organization and Curriculum**

### **2.1 Differentiated Curriculum Management**

The social and political changes have created new school conceptions based on reconfigurations of the knowledge society (Hargreaves, 2004), a new perspective of education and training.

As a change tool, the curriculum emerges as a central element of political decisions and socio-educational needs. Therefore, the term curriculum designates a set of school subjects and activities and extra activities in a given year and cycle, but it is also associated with the content of different subjects (Pacheco, 2005).

The curriculum, established by the educational policies proposes a bureaucratic pedagogy, through universal and impersonal application, assuming that all students have a uniform profile, being subject to the same disciplines during school (Formosinho & Machado, 2008). However, the curriculum must be understood as a social and cultural project, with shared decision-making and interrelational practices (Campbell, 2006).

This historically constructed project, is applied on the basis of school organization, which creates a border between a centralized and professional authority exercised by teachers and other educational agents (Leite & Fernandes, 2010). A school that uses its curriculum in a smart and effective way will need to consider the constant changes in society, as well as the necessary adjustments, from a heterogeneous population (Leite, 2003; Martins & Leite, 2011).

Nunes and Ponte (2010) distinguished two types of curriculum, the planned curriculum and the curriculum in action. The first is set by educational policies, while the second is adapted and implemented by teachers in schools, as active builders of it, according to the contextual reality. The curriculum follows the collective action of teachers, bearing a reflective awareness of the diversity of classes and students (Roldão, 2006; Pacheco, 2011). That means that the teacher realizes a flexible management of the curriculum in conjunction with the school's educational project.

Increasingly, it is attributed to schools and teachers the responsibility of an effective and appropriate training of each student, considering objectives, goals, skills and abilities (Campbell, 2006). Thus, the flexible management of the curriculum is "much more than a path that you need to go" (Abrantes, 2000, p. 141), towards autonomy and pedagogical differentiation. In this sense, a shared management of the curriculum becomes necessary, considering the need of the teacher to adapt their work plan to the profile of each student and class (Niza, 2012). Nevertheless, the difference should not "establish different levels of arrival, because of the starting conditions" (Roldão, 1999, p. 53), preventing the possibility of students from poorer backgrounds or difficulties, to achieve educational success, in a collaborative working class.

### **2.2 Curriculum and Teaching of Geography**

In the case of Portugal, the National Curriculum of Basic Education (Portugal, ME, 2012) presents a set of goals, objectives and capabilities to develop over basic education in different disciplines and cycles. As for the

teaching of geography, this should value projects and research activities, including observation, survey hypotheses, registration and processing of information, formulation of conclusions and presentation of results. The three thematic areas are the location, the knowledge of places and regions, as well as the interrelationships between spaces. According to the curriculum, students should be faced with challenge, learning by discovery and intersection of knowledge, through research moments, reflection and discussion that encourages progression and autonomy. Moreover, it is envisaged a curriculum in interconnection with the climate and the school's culture, through differentiation in various educational settings, in the diversity of cultural, educational and political dynamics.

### **3. Methodology**

In this study we try to understand the perceptions of students in 9th grade, given the organization of the teaching and learning of geography. Therefore, our research presents as a general goal, to find out how the students of 9th grade perceive curricular organization of teaching and learning of Geography in relation to motivation and school success.

The quantitative approach was privileged, because it is a method focused on gathering observable and quantifiable data (Tuckman & Harper, 2012). To this end, we carried out a questionnaire with open and closed questions, using as sample 120 students from 9th grade of a public school of the district of Oporto.

In search of answers, we define three hypotheses: H1 — Students perceive geography as a practical, meaningful and current discipline; H2 — Students relate the organization of curriculum content with school success; H3- The orientation of the teacher in the classroom influences a differentiated management of the discipline.

#### **3.1 Findings and Discussion**

The survey included 34 questions. Given its length, it will be presented and discussed the most relevant results, according to the general objective, as it was previously defined.

Starting the presentation and analysis of 120 students participating in the survey, corresponding to the total of 9th grade students in that school, 57% were females and 43% were males, with an average of 14 years.

By considering the importance of representations, it was asked students to describe the subject of Geography in 3 words, presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 Students' Description of Geography**

Three words that describe Geography		Answers %
General perception of Geography discipline	Variety of curricular content	43%
	Interesting content	23%
	Prepare for citizenship	18%
	Content without interest	11%
	Outdated content	5%
	Total	100%

Regarding the general perception of the discipline, 43% of the students surveyed believe that the syllabus of Geography have great variety, 23% say that they are interesting and 18% say that discipline prepares for citizenship. Given the low percentage of students who consider uninteresting content (11%) and outdated (5%),

we are pleased to conclude that most students reveal a positive perspective. In contrast, the class with less academic success considers the contents, outdated and uninteresting. It is clear that the motivational factor stimulates an active and interested behavior, which is reflected in the response of students.

With regard to curriculum content, it requested the appointment of a theme or topic to be chosen by the students, having obtained the results listed in Table 2.

**Table 2 Curricular Content Preferred by Students**

Topic of the geography discipline preferred throughout the year		Answers %
Themes	Subthemes	%
Population and Settlement	Demographic indicators	2.8%
	Human settlement areas (cities)	0.9%
Environment and Society	The water cycle	12.8%
	Biodiversity	16.6%
	Impact of climate change	11.0%
	Pollution	7.3%
	Endangered animals	36.7%
	3Rs Policy	0.9%
Development Contrasts	Human Development	0.9%
	Developed countries versus developing countries	3.7%
Natural Environment	Climate	0.9%
	Atmosphere	3.7%
	Weather	0.9%
	Landscapes	0.9%
Total		100%

According to the data from Table 2, the theme of election is the Environment and Society, with 85.3% of answers, especially about animals in danger of extinction, with 36.7% of answers, followed by biodiversity (16.6%) and water cycle (12.8%). The themes Natural Habitats, Development Contrasts and Population and Settlement obtained a residual percentage of responses. Normally, the Natural Environment and Population and Settlement are taught in previous years and the Environment and Society is usually taught at the time it was carried out the questionnaire. Thus, the temporal proximity to the program content can justify the choices or they can be justified by the personal interests of each student.

In justification of the choice presented in the preceding table, the students mentioned their interests and the ease of the topic discussed. List of students' opinions (E):

- (E1) "We learn more about the world and we learn what we can do to help these countries." (Contrasts development).
- (E30) "Because it's an interesting topic that speaks of endangered species and deforestation." (Environment and Society).
- (E25) "Because I love to know how others live and experience different cultures." (Population and Settlement).
- (E70) "I really like to know details of the landscape." (Natural Habitats).

In the speech is visible a semantic repetition of words of knowledge, particularly the verb "to know", revealing curiosity to learn current issues on the natural and social environment, in a citizenship perspective.

In addition to the interest of students by program content, when asked if the school is promoting academic success, it should be noted the high percentage of students (63%) that did not express opinion about the relation of the Geography program organization with academic success, expressing some distance, which is a constraint to teaching and learning.

Through the triangulation of the information on questions about the type of preferred classes, it appears that the students elect “practical classes” where it is allowed to perform tasks such as “statistical analysis, graphical and mapping”, “location of places” and “research and investigation”. In this sense, we can see that the students prefer a teaching and active learning, aimed at integrated development of skills and attitudes that promote the use and mobilization of knowledge. Thus, students value the active participation, stating that in Geography lessons, what they love to do is “work together”; “discuss issues” and “analyze videos and news”, the possibility of performing in an autonomous way that promote the geographical knowledge in relation to specific situations.

Most students prefer to work in groups. It should be noted that only a residual number prefers to work individually and the bigger part wants to work in groups with 4 or more elements. So, in Geography, students value the collaborative work. This preference is an asset, because of the interaction between subjects, the analysis of experiences and situations, as well as based search for solutions to problems, channeling the interest of students by appealing and current areas of intervention, such as, “endangered animals”.

In contrast, the students point out, as the main support of the classes, the school manual and that the classes are “too theoretical”, although “combine theory and practice”. In view of this disagreement, we seek to deepen the analysis with the cross-check between classes. The answers obtained are not consensual between the different surveyed groups, class A considers that, essentially, Geography classes “contribute to the formation of citizenship” and the B and D classes are classes that “combine theory and practice”. In class C respondents consider, above all, that the classes are “too theoretical” and “difficult to understand” but “contribute to the formation of citizenship”. In turn, the class E argues that the classes are too theoretical but their approach contributes to the formation of citizenship. In class F the focus goes to the difficulty in understanding the lectures. In this evaluation of Geography lessons by the students, we can see different perceptions, which influence their motivation and commitment during classes.

These two constraints, the recurrent use of the textbook and methodologies focused on theory, as seen by the students demonstrate a certain gap between the educational reality that still prevails in the daily life of schools and curriculum indications aiming active methodologies, application of knowledge in concrete and diverse situations.

As a result, students were asked about the aspects that should be improved in the classroom, for education stakeholders, students and teachers. The results appear in Table 3.

**Table 3 Aspects to Improve the Performance of Students and Teachers**

What is important to improve in Geography		Answers
Educational stakeholders	Aspects to improve	%
Students	Behavior/attention	35.8%
	Collaboration in tasks	3.1%
Teacher	Teaching method	30.6%
	Pedagogical-didactic resources	6.1%
	Attitude	7.1%
	No answer	17.3%
	Total	100%

By reading the table, it appears that in 38.9% of the answers given, are the students who should change their attitude. In fact, 35.8% of respondents assume that they should improve their behavior/attention and 3.1% in collaboration tasks. Regarding the teacher, it reaches 43.8% of the responses, which are divided on the need to improve the teaching method (30.6% of responses), attitude (7.1% of responses) and also the teaching resources (6.1% of responses). In justification, the students reported that:

(E 28) "classes should be motivating because Geography is a very interesting subject"

(E103) "it is necessary to behave better to reach a higher level of concentration."

It seems appropriate to highlight the importance of motivation in the classroom, and the teacher's guidance, in order to monetize the work in an educational context.

It should be noted that despite the students evidencing what should be changed by the teacher of Geography, they also assumed their responsibility, highlighting the behavior. In this sense, joint work between the students and the teacher, may be useful in the future.

The motivation of the students, the teacher's guidance and the joint efforts of both, emerge as possibilities to achieve an improvement of the results, including an assertive definition of rules and methods of teaching and learning, that encourages and guides the pedagogical action, with academic success, as a goal. Carrying out activities and school work is a bridge to motivation and educational success.

#### **4. Final Considerations**

The work we have done, deepened essentially the issue of perceptions of teaching and learning by 9th year students of a public school, based on the curriculum of Geography discipline. The development of skills and competencies leads to the formation of autonomous, critical and creative students, so that at the end of basic education, young people are citizens able to work in their community. Being Geography a practical oriented course, it is important that the teacher through curriculum management, promotes a significant and dynamic teaching, to develop the autonomy of students and their taste and interest in the discipline. The orientation provided by the teacher in the classroom context is mandatory to the extent that it influences social representations of students and, therefore, the (un)success and (in)discipline. The more motivated are the students, the more positive their attitudes and behaviors and, consequently, the better the quality of their school results.

In this sense, we can say that our first hypothesis was confirmed, since a significant percentage of students believe that in Geography lessons, there is room to participate in a current, practical and meaningful discipline. Although lessons continue to be taught from an encyclopedic and theoretical way, using mainly textbooks, classes that suit the students are the ones in which the students can participate actively, that is, the classes where the emphasis of the geographic study for development capabilities and skills are used at their best, at the expense of teaching solely on content.

Regarding the second hypothesis, we conclude that the same could not be validated, given the apathy and detachment that students expressed, regarding the relationship between the organization of curriculum content and their school success. In fact, the majority of respondents did not recognize the organization of the contents as an essential element in their school success. However, a third hypothesis is validated, since the way the teacher leads the class motivates students and leads them to clearly understand the objectives pursued and rules to follow, encouraging their participation and valuing their initiatives. The orientation of the teacher in the classroom influences differentiated management of the subject, so the teacher-student interaction is key. Motivation is, again,

an important pillar of behavior, attention and commitment of students in schools. It is noteworthy that the motivation is related to the teacher figure, so the strengthening of it is important in the classroom.

Although this research was limited to a public school, and the results cannot be generalized, except for the approach on similar contexts, some regularities emerge. Despite the difficulties of students, differentiated management of the curriculum and the reflexive action of the teacher, the adequacy of the contents to a specific context of climate and school culture, can make a difference to the quality and educational success. As such, it is important that teachers see their students as trainees who need their help to accomplish it. To understand an educational relationship is necessary to look at it in context, because that is where there are located the behavior models. Having curricular device foundation, the essence of the educational act passes between the teacher and the student and mostly involves phenomena of communication and influence, therefore, differentiated management of the curriculum can make all the difference in educational quality and success.

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