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The Courses of Teacher Education of the University of Évora and its Relationship with the Schools

Introduction

This introduction aims to present briefly the teacher education courses offered by the University of Évora and to describe the relationship between this institution and the schools. The relationship is examined historically and but then consideration is given to the situation for 1998/99 - as the reformulation of the “Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo” (Education Law 46/86 of October 1986), is implemented.

Until now the University of Évora and a number of other Portuguese universities, offer their students initial teacher education courses at two levels. The first is a “Bacharelato” level, lasting for 3 years and designed to prepare the “Educadores de Infância” who deal with children from 3 to 6 years old or “Professores do 1º Ciclo do Ensino Básico” who deal with children from 6 to 10 years old. The second is a “Licenciatura” level, 5 years duration and designed to prepare teachers for the 2nd and 3rd levels of the “Ensino Básico” (11 - 15 years old) and Secondary (16 - 18 years old).

These courses have no integrated structure, i. e., from the first year Sciences of Education subjects are taught together with the ones from the specific scientific areas. These courses, in any of the above mentioned levels, present a practical component, in which student-teachers go into schools and contact real classes. In the “Bacharelato” courses this contact occurs during the 3 years of the course, giving future teachers a progressive responsibility for teaching. That’s to say, in the first year student-teachers go into public institutions - Nursery and Primary schools - with the main aim of observing the institutional life: types and ways of relationship between teachers and pupils and among teachers, social interactions in the playground and the ways in which relationships with the parents are organized both in and out of the classroom.

During the second year, student-teachers assist with educational activities in collaboration with the teachers responsible for the activities. During the third (and last year) they are requested to plan and give lessons (in the primary schools) or activities (in nursery schools), their performance being observed and evaluated (especially formatively). At the University they present their doubts, problems and difficulties, and this reflexive activity is a way to appreciating the quality of the theoretical knowledge that underpins their performance.

In the, “licenciatura”, the practical component of the course is concentrated in the fifth (and last) year which is called “estágio pedagógico”. During this training period student-teachers are subject to two kinds of supervision: the one given by the University and the one under the responsibility of

the school where they work. Their required activity has two components, observation of the class given by the supervisor and the other student-teachers working in the same school, and teaching their own classes.

Models of relationship with schools

“Bacharelato” courses

Every year, in March, the University contacts the regional structure of the “Ministério da Educação” - D.R.E.A. (Direcção Regional de Educação do Alentejo) - in order to be informed about the Nursery and Primary schools which will accept student-teachers for the next school-year. Then collaboration protocols are established with those institutions, as a result of which the university pays a small salary (about 75 ECU) to the teachers each of whom will supervise two student-teachers and offers the school some materials (such as inkpots, paper, pens, glue, etc.) of the value of about 100 ECU per student-teacher.

In the 3 last years the University of Évora has reserved some places for those supervisors in their post-graduation specialization courses.

The university supervisors are responsible for the practice programme, which can be negotiated with each school, according to its particular needs.

All the teachers who work in the pedagogical practices programme whether school or university supervisors, constitute the so called “Conselho Coordenador das Práticas Pedagógicas”, an organ which is coordinated by one of the University supervisors and which establishes the contents and rules of the educational programs of the Pedagogical practices.

2.2 “Licenciatura” courses

For each of these courses (designed to educate teachers for the 2nd and 3rd levels of “Ensino Básico” and also the secondary level) the above mentioned D.R.E.A. communicates to the university, every August, the details of a number of schools in its intervention area, which are interested in receiving student-teachers for the next school-year, starting in September.

These schools must offer supervisors in every scientific subject, or scientific area to which student-teachers belong. The supervisor has their working time reduced to about 12 hours per week and receives an additional fee, similar to the one paid, by university to the supervisor of Primary and Kindergarten student-teachers.

Each of the schools receives 3 or 4 students in every scientific area, the actual number being determined (between one and four), according to the size of the school.

Each scientific area constitutes a “Núcleo de estágio”, e. g., the group of university supervisors (2 or 3), school supervisors (1 or 2) and student-teachers. The group of university supervisors identifies a Professor for the Educational Area and 1 or 2 supervisors for each Scientific area (Physics, Math's, History, Biology, English, French, Portuguese, etc.). These supervisors do not receive any financial support, but have a two hours reduction in their workload.

Some Comments on the Model

The brief description above shows that the relationship between the University and the schools is very similar for both types of courses. In fact the University doesn't participate in the selection either of schools or of the supervisors. The D.R.E.A. both designates and imposes. On the other side, this type of centralist relationship makes difficult to plan training programs.

In general student-teachers are subordinated to the plan elaborated by the schools to which they are assigned.. The University has no influence in the design of the training program of its students.

These circumstances are a barrier to the effective functioning of the practice given that there are usually some discrepancies between the University aims and the needs of the schools, and even between a Philosophy of education and the normal school functioning.

School-year (1998/99) Functioning

A new law on teacher education was published in September 98, This law brings some changes to the functioning of practice in schools. It will, for example, make the degree of "Licenciatura" compulsory for every teacher and nursery educator. This regulation will establish new rules for the organization of practice.

Every teacher education course now have a training period in the last year, e.g. two semesters. In the first semester student-teachers will remain in schools, practicing school observation and participating in the preparation of class activities with their school supervisors and attending orientation seminars at University. In the second semester student-teachers will progressively take responsibility for the class or classes of the supervisors. Their performance will be observed and evaluated by all the members of the "Núcleo de Estágio", that is by their colleagues and school and university supervisors (the university supervisor is the Professor who was in charge of the orientation seminar).

In order to prevent some of the problems faced in the previous models, the University has agreed with D.R.E.A. a protocol of collaboration which integrates the following points:

organization of a school-net to receive student-teachers, in order to guarantee the stability of educational centers;

facilitating electronic connection between university and schools, to enable more communication among the different actors in the training practice; thereby seeking a substantial improvement both in supervision and in communication between the two institutions leading the process;

supervisors must be chosen from those who have a MD in supervision;

increasing the number of places offered in post-graduate courses to school supervisors;

collaborative work of university professors in the design of educational practice programmes presented by the schools belonging to the net;

participation of university professors in the development of educational plans to be presented by the net;

participation of school supervisors in the educational programs the University will propose to its students.

These changes will occur only in the region of Alentejo, and are part of a packet that some Portuguese Universities, including the University of Évora, are piloting in order to present proposals to the Ministry of Education. The aim is to improve the quality of the practical component of teacher education and also to generalize and institutionalize the positive aspects of the experience.

We are aware that the system dynamics imposes certain limitations but we believe that by searching for a balance between the obvious reproductive function of Education and the necessary innovation desired, we are contributing to the improvement of teaching quality.