

Graduation in Basic Education in Portugal as a prerequisite for access to master's degrees that qualify for teaching in the first six years of schooling

A Graduação em Educação Básica em Portugal como pré-requisito para o acesso a mestrados que habilitam para a docência nos seis primeiros anos de escolaridade


Graduación en Educación Básica en Portugal como requisito previo para el acceso a maestrías que habiliten para la enseñanza en los primeros seis años de escolaridade

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ABSTRACT

The European Higher Education Area, resulting from the Bologna Process, implied changes in initial teacher education, which in Portugal is obtained through master's degrees. In the case of training for the first six years of schooling, access to these professionalising master's

degrees requires an undergraduate degree in Basic Education. Using this situation as a reference, the paper reports on a study that answers the following research questions: i) What perceptions do finalist students of this graduation have about the course?; ii) what importance do these students attribute to the Initiation to Professional Practice curriculum? iii) what influence do these students attribute to this training in choosing their future professional path? Data were collected through an online questionnaire whose responses were worked through simple statistics and content analysis. These data allowed us to conclude: the students consider that the undergraduate course in Basic Education offers solid theoretical preparation for future work as educators or teachers; however, many of them expressed only moderate satisfaction, or even no satisfaction, with the course, particularly in the relationship between the practical components and what is expected of professional performance; the students attribute great importance and even some influence to the teachers who, in the schools, receive them and support them in their socialisation for future professional activity.

Keywords: Graduation course in Basic Education; Portugal; Initial Teacher Education.

RESUMO

A criação do Espaço Europeu do Ensino Superior, decorrente do Processo de Bolonha implicou alterações na formação inicial de professores que, em Portugal, passou a ser obtida através de mestrado. No caso da formação para lecionar aos primeiros seis anos de escolaridade, o acesso aos mestrados profissionalizantes requer uma Graduação em Educação Básica. É tendo esta situação por referência que o artigo dá conta de um estudo que responde às seguintes questões de investigação: i) que percepções têm estudantes finalistas desta Graduação sobre o curso?; ii) que importância atribuem estes estudantes à componente curricular de Iniciação à Prática Profissional? iii) que influência atribuem os estudantes a esta componente de formação para a escolha do percurso profissional futuro? Os dados foram recolhidos através de um questionário online cujas respostas foram tratadas por estatística simples e por análise de conteúdo. Esses dados permitiram as seguintes conclusões: de um modo geral, os estudantes consideram que o curso de Graduação em Educação Básica oferece uma preparação teórica sólida para a futura atuação como educadores ou professores; no entanto, muitos deles expressaram apenas uma satisfação moderada, ou até nenhuma satisfação, com o curso, particularmente na relação entre a componente prática e o que se espera de um desempenho profissional futuro; os estudantes atribuem grande importância, e até alguma influência, aos professores que, nas escolas, os recebem e os apoiam na socialização com a futura atividade profissional.

Palavras-chave: Graduação em Educação Básica; Portugal; Formação inicial de professores.

RESUMEN

El Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior, resultante del Proceso de Bolonia, ha provocado cambios en la formación inicial del profesorado, que en Portugal se obtiene ahora a través de másteres. En el caso de la formación para los seis primeros años de escolaridad, el acceso a estos másteres profesionalizantes requiere la Graduación en Educación Básica. Es con esta situación como referente que el artículo da cuenta de un estudio que responde a las siguientes preguntas de investigación: i) ¿qué percepciones tienen los estudiantes finalistas de esta graduación sobre el curso?; ii) ¿qué importancia le atribuyen estos estudiantes al componente curricular de Iniciación al Ejercicio Profesional? iii) ¿qué influencia atribuyen estos estudiantes a esta formación en la elección de su futuro camino profesional? Los datos fueron recolectados a través de un cuestionario en línea cuyas respuestas fueron tratadas mediante estadísticas simples y análisis de contenido. Estos datos permitieron concluir: los estudiantes consideran que el curso de graduación en Educación Básica ofrece una sólida preparación teórica para el futuro trabajo como educadores o profesores; sin embargo, muchos de ellos expresaron sólo moderada satisfacción, o incluso ninguna satisfacción, con el curso, particularmente en la relación entre los componentes prácticos y lo que se espera de un desempeño profesional; los estudiantes atribuyen gran importancia e incluso cierta influencia a los profesores que, en las escuelas, los reciben y apoyan en su socialización para la futura actividad profesional.

Palabras clave: Graduación en Educación Básica; Portugal; Formación inicial del profesorado.

Introduction

With the creation of the European Higher Education Area (Portugal, 2005), courses at this level of education are now organized into three cycles: 1st cycle (undergraduate); 2nd cycle (master's); 3rd cycle (doctorate). In Portugal, in this process of adapting to the commitment made, known as the Bologna Process, the option for organizing the courses was the 3+2+3 model (Portugal, 2006), and it is now assumed that, in several areas, professional training only takes place at master's level. One of the effects on the initial training of kindergarten teachers and teachers was that it began to be carried out in two sequential stages (Portugal, 2006), breaking the possibility of integrated training, which until then had been provided by some higher education institutions (HEIs). The legislation that followed (Portugal, 2007, 2014) defined the conditions for access to vocational master's degrees and, in the case of

initial training for kindergarten teachers and teachers for the first six years of schooling, a degree in Basic Education was required.

To sum up, in Portugal, as a result of the legislation mentioned above, a degree in Basic Education has become a prerequisite for access to master's degrees that train you to be a kindergarten teacher or a teacher of the first six years of schooling. With this situation in mind, this article sets out to analyze the Basic Education degree in its condition and relationship with master's degrees that train for pre-school education, for teaching in the first four years, or for the 5th and 6th years of schooling. This study answers the following research questions: i) what perceptions do final-year students of this degree have of the course; ii) what importance do these students attach to the Initiation into Professional Practice (IPP) curricular component; iii) what influence do students attribute to this training component when choosing their future career path?

Curriculum structure of the Undergraduate Degree in Basic Education

The Bachelor's Degree in Basic Education, like all the courses in Portugal that provide training corresponding to the 1st Bologna cycle, has a duration of 3 years and a total of 180 credits (60 in each year of training) and is taken in person. In its conception, a credit corresponds to the "unit of measurement of the student's work in all its forms, namely, teaching sessions of a collective nature, personal tutorial sessions, internships, projects, work in the field, study and evaluation" and its value "expresses the work that must be carried out by a student in a given scientific area" (Portugal, 2005). In the creation of the European Higher Education Area, the European credit transfer system (ECTS) was one of the instruments of this European policy which, in line with a training paradigm focused on student learning, recognizes the work that students do for their training as the unit of measurement for the organization of courses, i.e. the work they do under the tutelage of teachers, but also the autonomous work they do to build knowledge.

In the case of the initial training of educators and teachers, the Portuguese legislation that regulates it defines the following training components: a) Teaching area; b) General educational area; c) Specific didactics; d) Cultural, social and ethical area;

e) Initiation to professional practice (Portugal, 2014, art. 7). Recognizing that training in the cultural, social and ethical area is ensured within the scope of the other components, this legislation defines the number of ECTS for each of them, which is different according to the master's degree that trains for each of the schooling levels.

For the Undergraduate Degree in Basic Education, which is the focus of the study to which this article refers, and which has a maximum of 180 ECTS, the legislation (Portugal, 2014) defines that the study plan should be organized in compliance with the following minimums for each training component: a) Teaching area - minimum of 125 ECTS; b) General educational area - minimum of 15 ECTS; c) Specific didactics - minimum of 15 ECTS; d) Initiation to professional practice - minimum of 15 ECTS. It also defines the following minimum criteria for the training component in the teaching area: a) Portuguese: 30 ECTS; b) Mathematics: 30 ECTS; c) Natural Sciences and History and Geography of Portugal: 30 ECTS; d) Expressions: 30 ECTS (art. 13). This degree is a prerequisite for access to master's degrees that qualify for pre-school education and teaching in the first six years of schooling, but at the same time prepares for the performance of educational functions not linked to teaching, such as tasks in non-formal education contexts inherent to the functions of higher education technicians. Graduates from this course can therefore access vocational master's degrees that prepare them for teaching at the above-mentioned school levels, or they can enter the job market in technical roles related to non-formal education.

Initial teacher training and socialization with the profession

The initial training of future teachers plays a fundamental role in preparing competent professionals who are well prepared to promote learning in the children and young people they are training. For this reason, it has been recognized that during this training, students/future teachers should experience situations of professional practice and reflect on the effects generated by the ways of working followed and how they could act to improve them (Leite; Fernandes; Sousa-Pereira, 2017; Leite; Marinho; Sousa-Pereira, 2023a; Leite; Sousa-Pereira, 2022; Nóvoa, 2009, 2017). It is in this sense that Nóvoa (2009) proposes that training should be built "within the profession", bringing to training the activities that day-to-day work requires. It is also the experience

of these situations that "provides socialization with the teaching profession, where knowledge is acquired and the values and cultures of the school organization that are essential to professional practice are internalized" (Leite; Marinho; Sousa-Pereira, 2023a, p. 15).

Experiencing professional situations has also been highlighted for the possibilities it provides for establishing a relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge (Allen; Wright, 2014; C ezar; Cruso e, 2021; Leite, Marinho, Sousa-Pereira, 2023b). By experiencing practical experiences in real teaching and pedagogical environments, students/future teachers have the opportunity to mobilize the theoretical knowledge built up during the training they receive at HEIs and enhance the development of pedagogical skills and teaching techniques. At the same time, through this relationship, students/future teachers learn to approach the teaching-learning process with a reflective attitude, and to improve practices based on evidence and observed results, which can be an asset when dealing with the specific challenges of early years education. These experiences of socialization with the profession, when properly accompanied, also prepare students for what could be a shock in the face of the diversity of professional situations and the associated demands.

It is in this sense that Pereira, Gouveia and Fraga (2019), in a study, concluded that during initial training, students who want to be teachers, in contact with the context of practice, experience crucial moments that provide them with critical action on real situations. These experiences encourage the development of skills in analyzing and understanding situations, based on observation and reflection. As also argued by Gauthier (2006), teachers must learn through real practice and through experience, because learning from one's own experiences implies experiencing particular moments that differ from everything that is usually encountered, and which require the reconstruction of meanings and the reconstruction of that practice.

It is within the framework of these perspectives that it will be possible to conceive of teacher training that is closer to the educational process, to the particularities and diversities present in the school context, and that promotes training experiences focused on the knowledge and practices of teachers in everyday school life. It is also essential, when thinking about the training of future teachers, to consider the symbolic

dimension of the school reality, including the values and beliefs that permeate the teacher's actions, as well as the relevance of the affective dimension that runs through educational practices. Promoting a culture of interdisciplinary work is also an essential aspect, particularly because of the possibilities it creates for valuing working in partnership, reciprocity and openness to others (Crusoe, 2014).

In line with this view, Junior Melo (2020) emphasizes the importance of incorporating epistemologies of practice into teacher training, in order to enable them to be reflective and investigative when faced with the challenges of practice. In this context, it has been considered that socialization with the profession is one of the central challenges in initial teacher training, with the aim of preparing students/future teachers for future professional contexts and promoting an adequate relationship between theory and practice (Alarcão; Canha, 2013; Sánchez-Sánchez, 2016). Recent studies (Leite; Sousa-Pereira, 2022; Pereira; Fraga, 2017; Pylman, 2016; Vumilia; Semali, 2016; Windschitl; Lohwasser; Tasker, 2022) highlight that professional socialization allows future teachers to develop knowledge and skills in lesson planning, collaborative teaching and collective learning processes.

As far as initial training is concerned, the advantages have been pointed out of it taking place through a gradual preparation in which students/future teachers are prepared for professional practice from the moment they enter the course. As supported by Cruz (2014), Nascimento, Almeida and Passos (2016), among others, an integrated approach to initial teacher training can be beneficial, along with the practical experience provided by training in context. Integrated initial training is training that transcends the traditional separation of disciplines and seeks to promote the exploration of different areas of knowledge, gradually mobilizing them in practice, for a holistic view of teaching-learning and professional performance (Nonenmacher; Araújo; Del Pinto, 2020; Silva; Felício, 2017).

As mentioned, in Portugal, the integrated model of teacher training has been replaced by sequential training, which takes place in two stages. In the case of educators and teachers of the first six years of schooling, as already mentioned, this takes place with a degree in Basic Education, followed by a master's degree which qualifies them to teach in pre-school education or in one of the schooling levels of the

first six years of school education. Despite this, the degree is expected to prepare students/future teachers to understand the complexity of the school environment and organizational cultures and to learn to consider and interpret social, cultural and economic issues that can influence the educational process. In this way, teachers will be prepared to respond to the needs and peculiarities of their students and to create inclusive and stimulating learning environments.

In short, it is crucial that the initial training of future teachers includes real practical experiences that prepare them for the breadth and complexity of the situations inherent in the teaching profession. On the other hand, it is hoped that this accompanying socialization with future professional spaces and activities will take place in the logic of mentoring, fostering collaborative and collegial relationships that facilitate the sharing of ideas and experiences (Leite, Marinho, Sousa-Pereira, 2023a; Orland-Barak; Wang, 2021).

It is in these experiences that students/future teachers are challenged and learn to use their power of agency (M. Melo; Almeida; Leite, 2022; Priestley; Biesta; Robinson, 2015) to make curricular decisions that take into account the context and the real students they are training and teaching.

Methodology

From a methodological point of view, the study adopted a qualitative approach (Creswell; Creswell, 2018), involving final-year undergraduate students in Basic Education from HEIs (Universities and Polytechnics) in Portugal. Data collection took place through an online questionnaire, with closed and open questions, which focused on the following themes: students' perceptions of the undergraduate course in Basic Education; the importance attributed to the PPI curricular component; the influence of the PPI component, and the way it is supported, on the choice of future career path. The questionnaire underwent critical validation using the "jury agreement" technique,

with the participation of two academics specialized in the field of study and, in its application, it followed the ethical procedures of anonymization of the respondents and the right to withdraw if they so wished. The answers to the closed questions were processed using simple statistics and the answers to the open questions were

interpreted using content analysis (Elo et al., 2014). A total of 67 final-year students responded to the questionnaire, with a gender distribution of 94% female and 6% male. The predominant age group of these respondents is between 20 and 29 years old, covering 97.1% of the participants.

Data presentation and analysis

The data is presented in relation to the research questions set out above.

Perceptions of final-year undergraduate students in Basic Education about the course

The responses regarding the final-year students' perceptions of the course were organized into the following categories: 1) level of satisfaction with the study plan; 2) balance of the training provided.

1. Level of satisfaction with the syllabus of the Degree in Basic Education

When asked about their level of satisfaction with the syllabus, 16.4% (n=11) of respondents said they were "very satisfied"; 68.7% (n=46) were only "reasonably satisfied"; and 14.9% (n=10) said they were "not at all satisfied".

The reasons given to justify a high level of satisfaction (n=11) relate to the relevance of the curricular units (UC)/training components that make up the syllabus, as the following excerpts illustrate:

The courses are all necessary for our professional future.

The course covers several areas of knowledge in terms of the syllabus, which is advantageous for our professional future.

The course is well-constructed and prepares us well for professional life.

I've already learned many aspects of raising children that I didn't know.

To justify the fact that they are only reasonably satisfied (n=46), students highlight a number of aspects that point to the need to improve the course. They also point to reasons related to the practical component of training and learning in context,

and the theory-practice relationship in the pedagogical approach. The following excerpts illustrate these perspectives:

Although some of the courses are not so useful for the future, most of them have prepared me to work as a nursery school teacher and primary school teacher.

The syllabus meets my expectations and is well organized, but I think the order of some of the courses should be changed between years and semesters: for example, "Special educational needs" should be in the first semester of the second year, before we move on to interactive educational contexts.

I like the course, but I feel that its structure is not the most appropriate nowadays. Very little contact with the institutions, subjects that aren't very practical and others that take up a lot of time but are of no interest, such as "Musical Expression".

I'm satisfied with all the courses. However, there could be a better balance between the practical part and the theoretical part.

The syllabus is well done in terms of the content it has provided us with, but on a more practical level, from lesson planning, strategies to use in the classroom, among others, it falls short.

The students have different opinions about the courses and the structure of the Basic Education course. Some of them see value in all the CUs, considering the breadth of knowledge areas, perceiving the course as preparatory for professional life, especially due to the IPP and practical CUs.

On the other hand, some students point to the lack of contact with schools and the absence of practical courses when they consider that the course has other courses that are of little use. They also think that the syllabus could have a better balance between theory and practice, allowing them to develop practical skills such as lesson planning and strategies for use in the classroom.

In summary, while some final-year students are very satisfied with the preparation for their professional future, others see the need for improvement,

especially relevant to their future work as educators and teachers when they access and finish their professional master's degrees.

The reasons given by students to justify their dissatisfaction with the course (n=10) are also related to the relevance of the CUs/training components that make up

the syllabus, the practical component of training and learning in context, and the theory-practice relationship in the pedagogical approach. The following were mentioned:

In my opinion, a lot of CUs should be changed and restructured.

We should be able to choose more courses. For those who don't want to do a master's degree in teaching in the 2nd cycle, for example, it shouldn't be necessary to have so many math courses.

This course is very much dedicated to the future master's degree for teaching in the 1st cycle and little to pre-school.

There are CUs that we don't have on the course and which would be fundamental, such as classroom management or managing children's emotions and behavior. We also learn little about how to teach content to our future students, because it's not enough to master the content of math, Portuguese or history if we don't know the pedagogy that allows us to teach this content in a way that allows students to build knowledge.

I don't underestimate the need to have theoretical knowledge about the various subjects. However, the hours of observation we have at IPP (24 hours over the three years) are not enough! Observation in context allows us to learn a great deal, and contact with reality allows us to better understand how the classroom works and what the best teaching and group management methods are.

You can't be a good teacher without practice. What's more, if there had been practice or observations in the context, it would have been easier to choose the master's degree, since I feel that we have no knowledge of the role of teachers/educators other than in theory.

We have plenty of theoretical information on how we should teach, but teachers could change their teaching methods, because two-hour lectures (even if they ask for our opinion) are not easy.

These testimonies point to the desire for change and restructuring in the Basic Education course, in the sense of greater flexibility in the choice of courses, especially in the case of students who already know which master's degree they want to follow. There is also criticism for the course being more focused on one of the educational

levels, when, as we mentioned above, this degree is a prerequisite both for access to master's degrees that train pre-school education and for the 1st and 2nd cycles of

basic education.

The students emphasize the overly theoretical nature of the course and call for more practice and interaction with children and school contexts, as they consider practice to be crucial to their success as teachers, agreeing with the ideas of authors such as Allen and Wright (2014), Sánchez-Sánchez (2016), César and Crusoé (2021), Leite and Sousa-Pereira (2022), Leite, Marinho and Sousa-Pereira (2023a) on the importance of practice in training. In this sense, they state that more hours of observation in a school context would be valuable for their learning, allowing them to better understand how the classroom works and to develop better teaching methods and group management. As we have already mentioned, this degree is not professional training for teaching, but rather a prerequisite for accessing such training. However, in these justifications, students end up conveying the idea of professional preparation or, at least, integrated training, in line with what is proposed by Nóvoa (2009, 2017) when he refers to the importance of bringing the profession into training, as it provides immersion in teaching practice, allowing the acquisition of knowledge and the internalization of values and cultures essential to professional performance in the school organization (Leite; Marinho; Sousa-Pereira, 2023a).

In addition to this data, it is worth noting that some courses could be altered and made more appropriate to the course profile, with the inclusion of topics such as classroom management, children's emotions and behavior, and effective teaching strategies.

Review of the training provided during the Basic Education Degree

Taking into account future professional expectations, the students' assessment of the training provided by the course they are currently completing is either insufficient for future professional performance/below expectations (n=43) or adequate/adjusted to expectations (n=24).

Among the arguments most often mentioned to justify what they consider to be

insufficient training for future professional performance/beyond expectations (n=43) are: the lack of bases for being a teacher, considering the practical dimension of professional practice; gaps in special/inclusive education; excessive focus on teaching areas, neglecting general educational foundations and compromising the "broadband" nature intended for the course; impossibility of experiencing all the levels and areas of the master's degrees they may access in the future; inadequacy of pedagogical approaches. They mention:

There's too much focus on math and Portuguese, and you forget about reality and certain educational issues. For example, when I went to IPP, there were situations I didn't know how to deal with [...] children with special needs.

I feel that when I'm doing my internship I'm going to parachute in and only then will I really learn what it means to be an educator/teacher.

It has a lot of pre-school work, it should be more adapted to the master's course we want.

I intend to do a master's degree in pre-school and, at the moment, I feel that this course has prepared me more for the 1st cycle.

I feel ill-prepared. I think I have a lot of theoretical content in my head, but I haven't been taught how to teach it. What's more, I've had almost no opportunity to observe teaching practices, which I consider to be fundamental and a source of significant learning for our professional training.

I hope that in the future I'll be able to have a practice that differs from the traditional one, like some of the ones we've learned, but since there's no practice I don't know how to do it and it's not explained to us. I'd like to be able to learn more and not just wait for my master's degree to arrive.

On a practical level, I feel very insecure. I feel that I'm not at all prepared to enter an educational context. I'm not asking them to let us give lessons to students, but to let us be in all the contexts to observe, so that we can at least get a sense of which area we really want to pursue. Because it's on this course that we should have that idea and not jump headfirst into a master's degree in an area that may not be the one we feel comfortable in.

Training is very restricted to teaching (pre-school to 2nd cycle) and does not promote other job opportunities [...].

One part of the training is relevant, the other not so much. They say that this course doesn't qualify us for anything yet, so I think that the training should be more focused on subjects about the child and not content that could be taught in a class.

The statements highlight a perceived gap between the theoretical training offered by the Basic Education degree course and the practical preparation needed

for future professional work as educators and teachers. Although these justifications continue to highlight a relationship between this degree and a future career as educators and teachers of the first six years of schooling, which is not provided for in the Portuguese legislation that regulates the teaching profession, in their speeches the students emphasize the lack of training on how to apply theory in real teaching contexts and how to deal with practical situations. However, it is worth noting the number of references to the amount of theory being considered excessive in relation to the practical component. Equally relevant are the suggestions that more emphasis should be placed on observation practices in real contexts as well as opportunities to deal with real situations and learn alternative teaching methods. It is in this sense that many of these students say they feel unprepared for the job market, noting a disconnect between their academic training and their future professional reality. They argue about the lack of preparation for teaching, even though the degree is also intended to qualify them for other educational roles, such as higher education technicians.

In summary, the students' speeches show a clear preference for more balanced training, which includes contextualized practices, i.e. training based on the epistemology of practice (J. Melo, 2020), training in context (Cruz, 2014; Nascimento; Almeida; Passos, 2016) and, in this specific case, which allows for a smoother transition to the master's degree and the work environment. There is also an interest in broader training, which covers situations involving children of different age groups and which can promote broader employment opportunities, i.e. training that gives future professionals a broader view of teaching and learning and professional performance (Nonenmacher; Araújo; Del Pinto, 2020; Silva; Felício, 2017).

On the other hand, when referring to training that was adequate/adjusted to expectations (n=24), the students essentially valued the theory-practice relationship, namely through the PPI curricular component, but also because of the diversity of

training components that make up the course. The following excerpts illustrate these views:

The course is suitable for future education professionals. It prepared me for

the future, the practical and didactic part made the difference.

If I had to work as a teacher and/or nursery school teacher, I would already feel somewhat prepared to do so, due to the theoretical and practical training provided by the course, particularly the IPP courses.

I'm positive about the practical and even theoretical experiences the course has provided. From the fieldwork and the teachers who gave us the chance to put into practice the activities we had planned.

Overall, the balance is positive, as the course covers a wide range of different areas that will help us in our professional future.

In these testimonies, the students reflect a positive assessment of the training provided by the Undergraduate Degree in Basic Education, with an emphasis on preparation for the future professional in the field of education. They emphasize that the course offers relevant theoretical and practical knowledge, providing the necessary foundations for professional training as early childhood educators and teachers of the first years of schooling. The practical and didactic part is especially valued, and is seen as a differential in training. These justifications mention the importance of the IPP as an opportunity to experience real practices and develop essential skills for the future profession. Positive aspects include the diversity of areas covered in the course, the possibility of planning and implementing practical activities, as well as adapting the training to the challenges of current teaching.

In summary, in this case, students consider the training offered to be adequate, relevant and beneficial for preparing future education professionals, highlighting the combination of theoretical and practical knowledge as a crucial factor for their confidence and competence in the future exercise of the profession. In this sense, by experiencing practical experiences in real environments, students are able to develop pedagogical skills and teaching techniques (Leite; Marinho; Sousa-Pereira, 2023a; Leite; Sousa-Pereira, 2022).

The Initiation to Professional Practice (IPP) curricular component in the Undergraduate Program in Basic Education

The analysis of the students' responses regarding the importance they attach to the IPP curricular component in the Undergraduate Degree in Basic Education made it possible to identify the following categories: 1) importance attributed to the IPP courses; 2) the role of teachers in schools who support socialization with

professional teaching practices; and 3) the influence of these teachers on the choice of future career path.

1. Importance attributed to IPP CUs

When asked about the importance they attach to the courses in the IPP component, all the students consider them to be very important, using expressions such as: "very important"; "extremely important"; "highly important"; "the most important"; "maximum importance"; "essential"; "the best courses and the most useful".

In general, the students justify the importance they attach to this curricular component by the fact that it allows them to come into contact with educational contexts that provide, as the data shows: i) preparation for future professional performance (n=46), and ii) a more informed choice of master's degrees that qualify for teaching (n=5). The main value of this component in preparing for future professional performance was mentioned:

These courses are of great importance because they bring us closer to our future profession, offering practical knowledge, real-life experience, the development of relevant skills, connections and motivation to achieve professional success.

It is one of the subjects, if not the most relevant subject on the course. It gives us an insight into the reality of schools, teaching and the professional lives of many teachers/educators.

It's extremely important. It gives us access to the reality of the profession, allowing us to get closer to the context in which we will be working in the future.

The most important course because we were able to apply the knowledge we acquired throughout the course, learning to adapt to a variety of situations and really preparing ourselves for the profession.

With regard to the relevance of the PPI component for a more informed choice of master's degrees for teaching, the following excerpts stand out:

It also allows us to understand exactly what area of teaching we want to pursue.

It can be decisive when choosing a major. You only know what you like if you

try it.

On the other hand, some students (n=10) simply justify the importance of this curricular component by the lack of time and training opportunities allocated, as expressed in the excerpts below:

Very important. In my case, I don't have a lot of UC like that, so I don't have a lot of practice.

It's very important, but I think we should have more time (e.g. I watched the children do their evaluation sheets for three hours).

We should have more observation time and in all three contexts (pre-school, 1st cycle and 2nd cycle) so that we have an idea of what level of education we want to follow. Because in theory I can have the idea of wanting to go to A and realize that, in reality, I don't identify with it and maybe it's better to go to B or C.

It may be the most important, but we only have it once a week... one morning. What are we going to learn once a week?

High importance, but this component should be longer and we should have access to other types of experiences, such as meetings, etc.

The opinions shared by these students highlight the significant importance of the IPP courses in the Undergraduate Degree in Basic Education, recognizing them as fundamental for professional preparation, as they allow them to gain direct experience in real educational contexts. Practice, as understood by Sánchez-Sánchez (2016), Leite, Marinho and Sousa-Pereira (2023a), among others, is seen as an essential component to complement and deepen theoretical knowledge and develop the skills needed for the future profession of educators and teachers. In these perceptions, students value the opportunity to come into contact with the reality of the profession, dealing with real challenges and situations that cannot be fully taught in a theoretical environment, which is in line with the results of studies by, among others, Nóvoa (2009), Nascimento, Almeida and Passos (2016), Junior Melo (2020) and Leite, Marinho and Sousa-Pereira (2023a; 2023b). Practice is considered a way of learning to deal with various situations, such as adapting to the needs of children with special difficulties, interacting with students and classroom management. It is through these experiences that students/future teachers are encouraged to develop their actions, based on their power of agency (M. Melo; Almeida; Leite, 2022; Priestley; Biesta; Robinson, 2015).

However, it should be noted that, while some students express great satisfaction with the quality and impact of the practical CUs they have had, some also point out the need for more time dedicated to these activities. In addition, there are references that show that some HEIs are not offering these students what the legislation provides for, i.e. that the IPP allows contact with situations from different contexts associated with early childhood education, namely pre-school education and the 1st and 2nd cycles of basic education. As some of the answers stressed, this would enable them to make more informed decisions about their future areas of work.

2. Role of teachers who , in schools, support socialization with professional teaching practices

When asked about the roles taken on by teachers in schools who support them in the process of socialization with the teaching profession, the final-year students predominantly refer to the roles of: i) "model" to observe and didactic advisor (n=42); and ii) "mentor" to the trainees in their professional experiences in the classroom (n=10).

The following excerpts clarify the students' perspectives on what they see as the role of "role model" to observe and didactic guide (n=42), based on the accumulated knowledge to pass on to the students:

They served as role models and we could see what kind of educator/teacher we wanted to be or not.

They cooperated with us by always being available to answer our questions, show us what they knew and give us information about the work in the schools.

They explained what happens, what we should do, what we should look out for. They gave us essential tips and advice.

They always helped us, trying to explain the reasons for their practices, providing us with resources and clarifying all our doubts and questions.

In my opinion, it was inspiring, each with their own method, which made us realize the different ways they have of dealing with students and understand the content we were learning much better.

The students' opinions highlight the recognition and appreciation of the

experience and accumulated knowledge of teachers who, in schools, supported them in socializing with the teaching profession and what it entails, and which makes it clear that knowledge is "passed on" to future teachers, as a "legacy" that cannot be lost. This importance was also highlighted in the studies by Alarcão and Canha (2013), Vumilia and Semali (2016), Leite and Sousa-Pereira (2022), Leite, Marinho and Sousa-Pereira (2023a).

As for the role of "mentor" to the trainees in their professional experiences in the classroom (n=10), *this* was mentioned by the students:

School teachers helped to select themes/activities for the classroom; they supported the ideas proposed by the teaching pair. They helped with the planning of activities, were very open to our proposals and supportive throughout this period spent in context, helping us to improve our teaching practice.

They helped us set goals and solutions and let us cooperate with them in every way. We were also able to learn a lot from them about how to deal with certain situations.

They really helped us to understand what a teacher's professional life is really like, taking into account their experiences, and also gave us the opportunity to experience what it's like to be in their role.

The students' perspective on the teachers who worked with them, although presented by a small number of students (n=10), points to their being accompanied as "mentors" (Orland-Barak; Wang, 2021) and therefore more closely and over a longer period of time, involving feedback and encouragement, fostering the development of an awareness and critical analysis of the students'/future teachers' strengths and areas

for improvement. The students' opinions also highlight the access to a more realistic vision of the school, offered by these teachers to the students during the contact, motivating them towards the teaching profession, as also proposed by Pylman (2016).

3. Influence of the teachers who accompanied them at school on the choice of future career path for final-year undergraduate students

As already mentioned, in Portugal, professional training for teaching in pre-

school education and the first six years of schooling takes place in two stages, with the Bachelor's Degree in Basic Education being the first stage, followed by a Master's Degree which qualifies for teaching at one of these levels. Almost all of the students taking part in this study (98.5%, n=66), who had completed their undergraduate degree in Basic Education, said they intended to apply for one of the master's degrees that correspond to the next stage.

When asked if the contact they had with educators and teachers who accompanied them at school on the CPI courses had any influence on their choice of future career path, the answers were very evenly distributed between yes (n=34) and no (n=33).

Among those who referred to the influence of these educators and teachers on their choice of the master's degree they intended to apply for, this influence was reflected both in the redefinition of their initially planned path (due to the positive and negative experiences they had had at the various levels of teaching qualifications), and in the confirmation/consolidation of the idea they had when they entered this course (as a result of positive experiences at the desired level of education). Students mentioned:

I really got to know the age group that captivates me the most, which is undoubtedly the little ones. I felt happy there with them and so did the teacher.

At the IPP for the 1st cycle, contact with the teacher opened up new horizons for me in relation to this cycle of education. Initially, I had only thought about working in nursery or pre-school, but when I met this teacher, I developed a taste for and the possibility of working in primary school.

Yes. Throughout my academic career, I've observed at all levels and in one of my observations at pre-school, I came into contact with a teacher who was so kind as to show me a bit of the work she does with the children and I was amazed. The same happened with a primary school teacher, and all at a time when I was undecided about my master's degree.

A lot. I've met some incredible teachers who have made me even more certain that I'm on the right course.

On the other hand, the students who say that there was no influence on their

choice of master's degree as a result of their contact with the educators and teachers who supported them in the PPI component, say that the previous idea they had when they entered the Basic Education course prevailed, although they stress the importance of this experience in consolidating their choice. This perspective is made clear in the excerpts below:

Not exactly, because I always knew what I wanted to do professionally, but they have undoubtedly helped me to justify this choice and to reflect on the kind of teacher I want to be, my attitude inside and outside the classroom, etc.

No, it just gave me a better view of the different levels of education.

Given the perspectives shared by the students, in addition to the undeniable importance attributed to the PPI curricular component, the relevance of teachers in schools who support the socialization of students/future teachers with professional teaching practices should be acknowledged, namely in the choice of future career path, as was also concluded in a previous study by Leite, Marinho and Sousa-Pereira (2023b).

Final considerations

The study to which this article refers was based on the testimonies of final-year undergraduate students in Basic Education, who were questioned using a questionnaire with both open and closed questions, regarding different perspectives on the course, the training they are receiving and their future intentions. The results revealed the diversity of the students' expectations regarding preparation for future

professional activity, with almost all of them considering continuing their training in a master's degree program for professional qualification in teaching.

The PPI courses were highlighted as fundamental for providing direct experience in real educational contexts and for enabling the development of essential skills for the profession of nursery teacher or teacher. However, it was also clear that some students felt that the amount of time dedicated to these practical activities

should be increased in order to ensure a more solid and comprehensive preparation for the diversity of roles that professional practice requires.

In addition, there is no denying the importance students attach to the teachers who accompanied and supported them in their contacts and teaching activities at school. The students recognize the contribution made by these teachers to the acquisition of practical knowledge and the development of relevant skills for future professional performance. They recognized that the way they received them and related to them, in some cases, was aligned with mentoring logic (Orland-Barak; Wang, 2021). They also acknowledged their influence on their choice of master's degree, which they intend to pursue and which will qualify them to teach in pre-school or early years education. This data confirms that teachers who accompany students/future teachers in schools are the trainers best placed to support their preparation for teaching (Leite; Marinho; Sousa-Pereira, 2023a; Leite; Sousa-Pereira, 2022; Pereira; Fraga, 2017), which is why it is important to ensure that they have the right profile. In this context, the study showed the importance, for socialization with the profession, of the PPI curricular component and the characteristics of the teachers who receive and support students/future teachers in schools.

It is also worth highlighting other data that the study revealed and which could contribute to improving training. Specifically, the students highlighted the disconnection between the theoretical knowledge acquired in the degree course and its practical application in the real teaching context. This indicates the need to achieve a better balance between theory and practice in the organization of the course, in order to prepare future teachers and educators for the challenges of the classroom and the teaching profession. However, this relationship, in the logic of integration, faces difficulties due to the option followed in Portugal for professional training for teaching to take place only during the master's degree.

Another aspect to note from the students' opinions on the courses that are part of the syllabus points to the proposal for greater flexibility in the curriculum, which many of them expressed with the suggestion of a freer choice in selecting courses, especially for those who already have a clear idea of the master's degrees they wish to pursue. Curricular flexibility would allow for more personalized training in line with individual professional goals. Despite this, and we must not ignore this, there have been

students who, in the contact they have had with other levels of education, have changed their initial intention, that is, they have changed their intention of the level of education at which they wanted to become a teacher. This is also one of the reasons why the CPI course provides contact with both formal education situations at different levels of schooling and non-formal education situations. However, these respondents expressed concerns about the excessive emphasis on one of the levels of education, a situation that may be related to both future intentions and the partnerships that HEIs establish and which deserve to be reflected on. Considering that this degree is a prerequisite for master's degrees in pre-school education or teaching in the first four years of school or in the 5th and 6th years of school, a careful balance is needed to prepare students for the diversity of professional profiles associated with them.

Summarizing the conclusions of the research, this study highlighted the diversity of students' perceptions of the undergraduate course in Basic Education, with particular emphasis on its preparation for future professional roles as educators or teachers. Although many students evaluate the course positively because it offers a solid theoretical basis and an introduction to professional practice, it is essential to recognize and reflect on the concerns raised.

The data collected revealed that a considerable proportion of students consider themselves only "reasonably satisfied" or "not at all satisfied" with the course. This dissatisfaction is closely linked to the perception that the practical training offered is insufficient, especially in terms of preparation for the real challenges of the classroom and the teaching profession. In addition, concern about future professional performance emerged as a recurring theme, highlighting a gap between students' expectations and the reality of the course. Although it is important to reflect on these students' opinions, it should not be overlooked that this undergraduate degree in Basic Education in Portugal is not professional training for teaching, but merely a prerequisite for access to master's degrees, which are professional.

In summary, although it is recognized that it is important for the course to offer a solid theoretical basis and an introduction to the professional environment, it is essential not to ignore situations that can enrich relationships for a better balance between theoretical knowledge and practical situations. In this sense, the study offers

unique and significant contributions to the understanding of training in Basic Education. It also provides valuable insights into students' expectations of professional practice and preparation for teaching, contributions which are essential for improving teacher training curricula. The study therefore enriches dialogue and reflection on initial teacher training, highlighting areas for future development and reinforcing the need for a more integrated and practical approach to teacher training. In this context, for future research, it would be valuable to obtain the opinions of master's degree students accessible through this degree, in order to analyze whether it is appropriate to rethink the restructuring of the course.

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