

Is it possible to mix traditional and modern methodologies in the classroom context ?

Ana Cláudia Sousa Soares
Elementary school teacher
Private researcher
With the support of: Colégio Semear

ABSTRACT

During my bachelors degree, I got to observe classes in many different contexts. However, the result was one of two: there were the type of elementary school where the teacher was the main focus point and the students were mere observers; and there were those schools where I witnessed classes where all the students were actively involved and the teacher barely gave any directions to what needed to be done.

These observations took place in elementary schools in Portugal, but as I moved to Cape Verde the same thing kept happening.

So far, none of the schools I've visited seem to intertwine different methodologies in order to create their own.

So it led me to think if in other countries would happen the same. I started thinking how other schools would develop their curricula and how the day-by-day school life would be in them.

With this research I intend to travel around the world and discover which are the methods adopted in some of the countries and if there is a reason for each school to commit to a single philosophy over so many others.

BACKGROUND WORK

Nowadays, in Portugal, it is becoming more and more popular that elementary schools say they follow a different methodology or use a more modern approach when teaching their students. However, when one observes how the pedagogical differentiation is made inside of the classroom, very often one finds that it is solely based on the teacher helping more or less directly those students who are showing some type of problem. Real creativity and autonomy are very hard to find when those classes are observed.

The most common schools are still the so called “traditional schools”, which were given this name due to the method they use. In these schools the teachers follow the ancient methodology, where they are the center of the class and the knowledge is transmitted from them to the students, in a one-way monologue. The children hear it, copy it from the board and repeat it until they have memorized the lesson. As stated before, these are the schools that are now claiming to be modernized, to be changing their ways into more modern approaches. And in some aspects they might even be but more often than not the ancient ways still prevail, creating somewhat of an unclear method to both observer and students.

Other than this one, there are at least three other main types of schools in Portugal.

One of them follows a movement called “Movimento Escola Moderna” (modern schools' movement). I was able to observe classes in one of these schools in the year 2007, for one month, and that is where I got some of the ideas I later on used in my classes in Cape Verde. However, in those schools, any influence from the traditional method is generally cast aside. This includes, for example: no use of schools books, the belief that the teacher is a mere facilitator of the knowledge, providing the students with the necessary tools to acquire it and the children are the ones in charge of their own learning process. Although it promotes autonomy and responsibility on the children, it can also hide specific difficulties on each child, because they are the ones choosing what to work on and it is only natural that they are drawn to what it is easy for them to do.

Another type of school that also exists in Portugal bases its method on a pedagogue named João de Deus, who wrote a spelling book in 1876 that is still used today. In these schools, the teacher uses the spelling book to teach the letters of the alphabet one by one. The vowels are the first ones to be taught, followed by the consonants with the simplest degree of complexity and only after that the consonants with the higher degree of complexity. After all the letters are learned on their own, they are put together to form sounds, then words, then phrases. This process usually takes a whole year, which means the students are only able to read entire sentences by the end of first grade.

These schools don't use any other method, nor allow any other type of approach than this one. Furthermore, this is a Portuguese spelling book, which means the students only learn the letters used in the Portuguese alphabet, leaving aside the K, the Y and the W.

Lastly, there are also Waldorf Schools in Portugal which base their methodologies on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. In these schools students have a lot more contact with arts and nature since the early stages of their development and they are stimulated in order to develop their social competence, as well as their critical mind and creativity. However, these schools tend to block the use of any electronic tool, as they are seen as “an act of spiritual poverty, emptied of the necessary moral principles that promote the values of freedom, peace and communion in the emerging society”.¹

In Cape Verde most schools still follow the type of traditional teaching described above. Nonetheless, in 2012 the Ministry of Education started a new approach to the introduction of reading and writing, in the first grade. I witnessed all the meetings that were scheduled to explain to the teachers of the capital (Praia) how to conduct this method and the reaction of most was of total denial. The body of teachers that were gathered on those rooms, to learn about a new way of teaching and enrolling the students in their own process of learning, blocked the innovation.

During the following year, the Ministry of Education visited each school from the capital to observe the method being put into practice. One of the classrooms that was visited was mine. Being a method somewhat similar to those I had already observed in Portugal, for me it was easy to make it work. And the reaction of the Ministry was of complete surprise, which later on they explained me that was due to the fact that they had seen very little schools conducting the method as it should. As I did.

In 2013, a group of four Brazilian researchers made a similar research, which took them a year to complete and the visit to 13 schools spread out through 9 different countries. From this research emerged a very interesting and inspiring book, that is currently available on-line as a Pdf version.² However, this research had a different purpose than mine, because they focused solely on schools that used a different methodology. Which means, they went looking for schools whose methodology was already avant-guard, schools that stood out in their own environment because of their open or modern pedagogical approach.

¹BY Raul Guerreiro in <http://www.educare.pt/noticias/noticia/ver/?id=14262&langid=1>

²Mayumi C, Piza C, Shimahara E and Gravatá A (2013) *À volta do mundo em treze escola*;

OBJECTIVE OF RESEARCH PROJECT

With this project I intend to find a way to combine parts of the old method with parts of the modern approaches in order to deal with different situations that make part of day-by-day life of teachers and students.

More importantly, I want to find out:

- a) if all schools, like in Portugal, stick to one methodology, not allowing themselves to be influenced by so many other ideas.
- b) Which methodologies do come together (if any) in order to create a true individuation of the learning process.

For that I propose to observe schools that are seemingly alike so many others, schools that are not already known for their creative approaches, because it is in those schools that I want to find out how the teachers are working, how the teachers are managing their classes and from there extract whether they are influenced by different theories or if they commit to a single philosophy.

Furthermore, I expect to gather a significant amount of examples that will allow me to prove that by not confining the educational process to a single pedagogical theory, we create a richer and more significant learning process for our students.

These ideas will later on be used as a base for a masters thesis which will hopefully evolve to create some changes in the educational system.

My ultimate goal is to create a school where all the best ideas, from all the schools I have visited, will come together to form a different methodology: my methodology!

OUTLINE THE PROJECT

This research will be conducted before I enroll on a masters program due to the fact that the length and cost of the project would not allow me to do all the visits while studying.

Therefore, I intend to visit at least one school in each continent, if not more, in the next two years.

Once I reach this goal and have already a base to work with I will start my masters and continue with visits to other schools, closer to home.

In each visit, the goal is to accompany at least one group of students for a week and observe all their school routines – classes, time-outs, lunch breaks, extracurricular activities...

The observation will be done by me, focusing on the following topics:

- Organization of the classroom
- Daily routines of the group
- Subjects taught in school (incl. extra-curricular activities)
- Management of students' behavior inside and outside of the classroom
- Integration of special needs' students
- Students' access to new information
- Learner engagement
- Tools used to support the learning process
- Assessment methods

This information will be gathered mainly through observation, but I will also interview teachers, students and principles to assess their own point of view regarding the work that has been done.

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Ana Soares