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Teacher Curriculum Autonomy in Angola: a look at the Legislative Perspective

Autonomia Curricular do Professor em Angola: um olhar na perspectiva da Legislação

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Abstract

The Angolan Presidential Decree nº 160/18, of July 3, implicitly seeks to generate a new perspective of curriculum management, defining the limits of autonomy to teachers as curricular agents. However, there are some dissonances between the norm and the practical reality on the ground. In this sense, the present article seeks to analyze the curricular autonomy of the teacher in the light of the referred legislation in order to verify if it guarantees the educational success of the students. In order to support our analysis, inspired by a qualitative approach, we have employed a literature review and document analysis. In general, it is clear that the need for greater teacher autonomy substantially revitalizes the collective process of construction of the teaching process and the context of the emerging school. However, in the Angolan case, although autonomy has been legally conferred on teachers, ignorance of the legal prerogative means that teachers simply comply with what is essential and limited themselves to a prescribed curriculum to the detriment of shared decision-making, calling into question the quality of the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: Curriculum Autonomy, Teaching, Quality of Teaching and Learning.

RESUMO

O Decreto Presidencial Angolano nº 160/18, de 3 de Julho, procura gerar, tacitamente, uma nova perspectiva de gestão curricular, consignando margens de autonomia aos professores, como agentes curriculares. Porém, permanecem algumas dissonâncias entre o estatuído na norma e a realidade prática no terreno. Neste sentido, no presente artigo procura-se analisar a autonomia curricular do professor à luz do referido normativo, no sentido de se, averiguar se garante o sucesso educativo dos discentes. A fim de dar suporte à nossa análise, inspirada numa abordagem qualitativa, privilegiámos a recolha bibliográfica e a análise documental. No geral, percebe-se que a necessidade de uma maior autonomia do professor, substancialmente, revitaliza o processo colectivo de construção do processo de ensino e o contexto da escola emergente. Porém, no caso angolano, embora legalmente conferida a autonomia aos professores, o desconhecimento da prerrogativa faz com que os docentes se limitam a cumprir o que lhes é essencial e curricularmente prescrito, em detrimento de uma tomada de decisões partilhada, colocando em causa a qualidade do processo de ensino e aprendizagem.

Palavras-chave: Autonomia curricular, Docência, Qualidade do Ensino e da Aprendizagem.



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1.Introduction

According to Afonso (2014), the notion of school autonomy should be analyzed taking into account the political and institutional landscape of school systems, and it is necessary to consider the role of the state as organizer and regulator of the school sector. Along with students and other educational agents, the teacher, as a driver of change, makes all the difference in school.

In this sense, regardless of the curricular paradigm adopted, the teacher plays a preponderant role in the organization and implementation of the teaching-learning processes, that is, in the operationalization of the curriculum. Hence the urgent need to share decision-making skills from the central government domain to the context of schools and teachers, reinforcing the role of the teacher.

As is the case in many other countries, in Angola, the current legislation (Basic Law of the Education System 17/16, art. 4) assigns to education a social and cultural role of great value. The Law expects the school to promote the harmonious development of the young generation's physical, intellectual, moral, civic, aesthetic and working skills in a continuous and systematic manner, raising its scientific, technical and technological level so that it can contribute significantly to the socio-economic development, the well-being of the population and the progress of the country. Education is also believed to contribute to the education of individuals able to understand national, regional and international problems, to address them critically and engage in constructive and active participation in social life, in line with other democratic elements and principles.

Thus, the school and the teachers are assigned functions that are far from the simple fulfillment of what is prescribed at the national level, allowing the curriculum and the elements that configure it to be also selected and organized in each context in order to harmonize with real everyday situations. It is precisely in this context that it becomes necessary to have teachers who are conscious and committed to the profession. Thus, it seems clear to us that there is a need to recognize teachers who exercise their pedagogical action with critical and reflexive rationality, with scientific and relational skills, imbued with the principles of curriculum autonomy, allowing, these characteristics to act together as a catalyst for success in the effective and effective functioning of the school. Following this logic, the publication of Presidential Decree No. 160/18 of July 3 seeks to generate a new perspective of curriculum management by giving some margin of autonomy to teachers as curricular agents in order to reinforce their role, and reflect about the quality of teaching. However, there seems to continue to be some dissonance between what

is laid down in the legislation and what happens in practice on the ground, with teachers in many cases giving preference to performing functions over decision-making for change and innovation. Within this context, this study aims to analyze the extent of curriculum autonomy granted to teachers in Angola in order to ensure the educational success of the student body, with a view to supporting it. Inspired by the qualitative approach, we chose to survey the current literature and analyze the current legislation. It should be remembered that the curriculum “is not the result of either specialists or the individual teacher, but of teachers who work collectively and have a critical, autonomous consciousness and are joined together according to critical interests” (Pacheco, 2001, p.40).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Autonomy concept

Regarding the meaning of the concept, Morgado (2000, p. 49, cit. In Afonso, 2014, p.2) considers that “autonomy” should be understood as “the capacity that any organization/entity, individual or collective has to be able to be governed by their own laws, to act, to orient themselves, to solve their problems, without having to resort to others, thus presupposing a certain degree of independence, never violating the most elementary postulates of responsibility”. In this sense, the notion of independence, identified as a structural dimension of autonomy, must be understood as the practice of freedom of thought, action, and creation. Always taking into account the rights of others, showing respect for the instituted norms and laws, which does not prevent thinking in an analytical, critical and reflective way, or acting responsibly, in order to solve problems according to the context, having always in view the benefit of the community or organization in which it operates. Therefore, while “autonomy” is a basic component of decentralized administration, it can also occur within centralized administration.

In this regard, “autonomy” becomes ambivalent and severely mediated by the degree of centralization and/or decentralization. The presence of the term autonomy in the contemporary educational context manifests the decentralizing tendency of the current educational and curricular policies, which idealize the school, not only as a strategic place for curricular decision, but also as a space for organizational and functional changes that make it possible to improve teaching and to adapt the education system to today's demands (Machado, 2006). In this sense, the ideas expressed about curriculum autonomy allow us to understand the centrality of the figure of the teacher, in the construction and (re) construction of the curriculum and its development, since it is in the classroom that the curriculum materializes and gains substance in

the lives of students. Therefore, it also seems fundamental to us to reflect on the need for decentralized educational and curricular policies as a practice that can change the educational scenario and its results, based on the autonomy of schools and teachers.

2.2. School and Teacher Curriculum Autonomy

As one of the purposes of contemporary educational and curriculum policies, school and teacher autonomy is now seen as an indispensable condition for the education system to be able to adapt and respond effectively and efficiently to the challenges it faces. Conceptually, “curriculum autonomy” is defined as “the ability of teachers to make decisions in the curriculum development process, both as regards the adaptation of the proposed curriculum at national level, the characteristics and needs of students and the specificities of the curriculum in which the school is situated, as regards the definition of lines of action and the introduction of themes that they deem indispensable for their full education” (Morgado, 2011, p.397).

However, the “curriculum” is seen as the result of the confrontation of the various elements of the community based on their awareness and the production of a critical view of the various elements that shape and characterize it. We encounter here the concept of “curriculum” as a praxis, that is, as a practice and a reflection on the practice itself, in a cyclical movement that is repeated over time and allows individuals to make decisions about the educational phenomenon. It is from this perspective that critical theory can be related to curriculum autonomy. In the light of this idea, curriculum autonomy is considered to be “an added value in changing pedagogical practices and improving the quality of student learning” (Morgado, 2009, p.3591). In this perspective, for Morgado (2000, p.105), the existence of a direct relationship between the autonomy and the responsibility attributed to teachers reaffirms that “the degree of teacher autonomy comes not only from his degree of accountability, but also from his personal and functional preparation for dealing with the responsibilities he is to fulfil. It is in this perspective that it makes perfect sense to address the different levels of autonomy that require greater skills and responsibilities from teachers.

2.3. Levels of Autonomy in the Educational Domain

According to Morgado (2000, p.53) “school autonomy is the ability of the school make decisions according to the global principles and values that guide the construction of the school reality”, in order to improve the whole teaching-learning process. This does not mean, therefore, the total freedom of the subjects, because decision-making skills, margins of responsibility and

accountability are demanded of them in this sense, there are five levels in which, in the educational domain, autonomy is dimensioned: political autonomy, administrative autonomy, financial autonomy, scientific autonomy and pedagogical autonomy, including the curricular autonomy (Morgado, 2000), p.50). In formal terms:

- a) Political autonomy derives from the “exercise of political power”, above all, in the genesis of a total political autonomy, in the case of the State, and a partial political autonomy, in the case of (...) the municipalities;
- b) Administrative autonomy derives from the “exercise of the legal function of the administration” with “own decision-making power” and translates into the execution of different administrative acts, such as asset management, staffing, among others, and the cumulative regulatory powers (generic) and management (concrete) powers;
- c) Financial autonomy consists of the power to draw up a private budget, produce, manage and assume its own income and expenses;
- d) Scientific autonomy translates into the free choice of a scientific project, definition of study plans and programs, creation of study and research centers;
- e) Pedagogical autonomy is defined by the power to freely choose and/or define teaching methods and techniques, organizational structures of the teaching-learning and assessment process, teaching management bodies and their operating strategies and assessment procedures. It should be noted that the concept of pedagogical autonomy is one of the concepts that is most commonly used in education.

Associated with the idea of autonomy, the concept of decentralization stands out, understood as a process of transferring decision-making powers from the central state organs (Ministry of Education, for example) to others that depend on them (Provincial Directorates, Schools, etc.). Hence Paraskeva and Morgado (1998, p.119 cit. In Machado 2006, p.19) state that what “legitimizes decentralization is the autonomy of schools without being subject to external control”. In this line of thought, the school is seen as “an organ endowed with effective autonomy, thus not appearing to be bound by ties of dependence, being able to act freely according to its interests” (Paraskeva & Morgado, 1998 p.119 cit. In Machado 2006, p.19).

In schools there has been a tradition of centralized administration, resulting from normative overproduction by the state, in order to control and determine much of what goes on there. This trend of bureaucratic inspiration explains why schools recurrently base their reality on a top-

down implementation of the curriculum. However, “norms do not by themselves rule out the possibility that some internal dynamics impose a certain anarchic order or at least create some spaces of autonomy, weakly linked to the rest of the structure” (Sarmiento, 1996 cit. In Machado, 2006, p.22). Schools are primarily made up of people who relate to each other at various levels, seeking to establish communication through a common language. On the other hand, the community generally has expectations about the school, which makes its permanent members seek to adjust or challenge behaviors and expectations. These interactions, essentially cultural in nature, are, according to Machado (2006), the main source of autonomy, since they condition the type and nature of the rules that the school agrees to reproduce and define the norms that it must produce.

Regardless of the way(s) autonomy is perceived or the degree of autonomy they have been able to attribute to schools, the truth is that the word autonomy has entered definitely in the educational language, both at the level of normative documents, albeit timidly and tacitly, as in the discourses that shape the educational landscape.

Parallel to this approach, it seems legitimate to ask: do teachers know the margins of autonomy granted to them by law? To what extent do teachers assert the curricular autonomy they enjoy, that is, how is their performance consistent with the real needs of the education of the new generations, through the educational processes? These and other questions lie in the approach presented in this article.

2.4. Elements of Curriculum Operationalization in School Practices

The role played by the teacher in the curriculum development process depends on the type of role and accountability assigned to him/her in the curriculum structure, taking place according to the degree of curriculum autonomy displayed. The teacher's curriculum autonomy can be observed through an analysis of the different elements of curriculum operationalization. Accordingly, to answer the question about the curricular autonomy that teachers enjoy, we use the framework of teacher curricular autonomy presented by Pacheco (2001, p.101, op cit. In Afonso, 2014, p.9), according to which:

- a) The teacher is given autonomy in defining the learning objectives at the class level through a collegiate autonomy shared with the other teachers;
- b) Regarding the contents, the teacher has no autonomy to select and organize them, due to the existence of programs designed at national level, but has full autonomy in the

context of the programming carried out within the teaching group for its sequence and extension so that they are understood by the students. The degree of freedom with which the teacher teaches the content is part of a subjective autonomy, which is one of the fundamental aspects of the hidden curriculum, even in view of the obligation, or not, to fulfill the program;

(c) The teacher enjoys broad autonomy with regard to teaching activities and resources. The programs contain methodological suggestions that are mere recommendations, which are further filtered by suggestions from manuals and/or textbooks. First in a group and then individually, the teacher manages the time of learning without being subjected to a previous framework, using the resources and proposing activities that he/she considers most suitable for the students;

(d) As regards textbooks or textbooks, teachers enjoy shared autonomy with regard to their choice and use;

e) With regard to the assessment of student achievement, the teacher enjoys collegial autonomy from the assessment modalities and procedures and subjective autonomy in applying the criteria by which he/she evaluates.

As we emphasize in this article, the teacher is therefore the instigator of decisions about the whole curriculum, allowing him to adapt, in the context of implementation, the proposed, presented, programmed and planned curriculum. In fact, curriculum autonomy results from a process that should be progressively improved with work, reflection, commitment to the profession and, if possible, with the involvement of the whole educational community. Thus, it seems clear to us the need for some indispensable conditions for the operationalization of the curriculum to be efficient from the perspective of autonomy.

2.5. Conditions for the construction of curricular autonomy

Regarding the curricular operationalization carried out by the teacher from an autonomous perspective, Morgado (2011, p.399, op. Cit. In Afonso, 2014, p.10) mentions at least four conditions without which it will become “difficult for teachers to assume their responsibilities”, namely:

a) Good basic training and a permanent pedagogical and scientific updating that allows for making informed decisions and developing curricular innovations, in line with the changes that are intended to be implemented;

- b) Possibility of accessing resources essential for improving the quality of education;
- c) Working conditions that allow for changing the rhythms and forms of work;
- d) Educational and curricular policies that allow the school to assume itself as a true space for curricular decision, and is no longer merely a place for the implementation of decisions made outside it.

Further, regarding the construction of curricular autonomy, Morgado (2003, p.337, op cit. In Afonso, 2014, p.10) argues for the “importance of the curricular project as an instrument of renewal and/or innovation of pedagogical practices and of building curricular autonomy of the school and the teacher”, considering it as a structuring element of school autonomy. Following the approach of school and teacher autonomy, in order to improve school practices and contexts, it is imperative, in light of current legislation, to address teacher curricular autonomy in Angola.

3. Methodology

The study follows an essentially qualitative approach, using a literature review and documentary research as data collection techniques. According to (Coutinho, 2011), the “qualitative nature” approach aims to understand phenomena in their entirety. In this sense, the choice of this approach allowed for a significant and constructive in-depth analysis of the teacher's curriculum autonomy, as well as the set of activities developed by the school in the various social contexts. The literature review consisted of a search for published theoretical references and analysis of the scientific contributions to the subject in question, in order to put in dialogue the various approaches and to build a corpus of knowledge that aims to enrich knowledge this subject. In the case of the present investigation, we commenced with an analysis of the official legislation and regulations in force at the country level (Angola), which proved to be relevant for the study.

4. Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.1. Teacher Curriculum Autonomy in normative discourse

In the context of Angola, the education system is centered at a national or central level. However, it is up to the local level to contextualize its application, due to the diversity of the students and the specificity of the contexts. The attempt of decentralization imposed by the Ministry of Education is clearly visible in the regulations (Presidential Decree No. 160/18, of July 3, which regulates the Career of Education Agents), stating, albeit timidly and implicitly, that the school should regard itself as a specified space for curriculum management and

contextualization. Although the degree of teacher autonomy is not explicit in the guidance documents, such as the Education System Base Law, Law 17/16 of 7 October, and even though it is not at the level of the debate about the evolution of Angola's education system over the 35 years of independence, it seems to us however that there is a certain opening for the promotion of teachers' margin of autonomy. This trend started from the coming into effect, though now repealed, of Decree No. 3/08 of 4 March, in its article 11, concerning the profile of the teacher, in particular in points f), g) h) and l), can now be more accurately observed in the promulgation of Presidential Decree No. 160/18 of 3 July, in its article 18, concerning the profile of the secondary school teacher, in particular in points i), j), k) and), and Article 53, concerning teachers' duties, in particular in points (c) and (h), whereby the teacher is called upon to:

Define the specific objectives based on the general objectives and content of the established programs, taking into account the context in which they will work, taking into account, inter alia, the conditions of the educational institutions, the economic and socio-cultural environment in which they operate, and the characteristics and needs of the students it aims to teach (Article 18, point “l”);

Adopt teaching methods and means, as well as mechanisms for pedagogical differentiation and program flexibility, adapting them to the diversity of the students, in order to promote school success, namely in terms of specific objectives, essential content and integral student development. (Article 18, point “j”);

To make the implementation of teaching programs more flexible, adapting them to the diversity of the pupils, in order to promote school success, namely in terms of specific objectives, essential content and integral development (Article 18, point “k”);

Collaborate with colleagues in the implementation of strategies that promote students' educational success (Article 18, point “o”);

Flexible and coordinated management of teaching programs so that the majority of pupils are successful in terms of content (Article 53, point “c”);

Enrich and share educational resources, as well as use the new methods and means of education offered to them, with a view to opening up innovations for enhancing the quality of education and teaching (Article 53, point “h”);

The content of this decree is essentially curriculum development and allows schools some freedom to adapt the national curriculum to the diversity of students and the specificities of local

contexts. This curricular management has organizational implications, namely in terms of human resources management and material resources. As can be seen, the margin of autonomy is given to the school and teachers with the aim of improving the quality of education and teaching. Thus, it is up to them to take a new stance in the new context. Morgado (2000) demonstrates the same posture in considering that, in order to make the school a place of change, it is necessary to give it greater decision-making powers and to create conditions so that it can build its own autonomy, that is, to regard itself as a space for reflection and collective construction, promoting diversity and innovation.

However, the educational reality still demonstrates some school practices that go against the postulates of the legislation, probably owing to lack of knowledge of the norm, or due to some resistance, or because of the lack of some competences that allow the transposition of the stipulated sections of the normative documents into school practices. Therefore, because many documents are monolithically conceived by central structures, without listening to local idiosyncrasies (Pacheco, 2000), many teachers prefer to remain in their comfort zones, favoring executive functions based on decontextualized and inflexible practices, putting the achievement of the program objectives and, cumulatively, the quality of education into question. Leite (2003) concludes that this centralist tendency in curriculum implementation discourages teachers and is not sustainable. In fact, curriculum autonomy results from a process that should be progressively improved with work, training, reflection, commitment and, if possible, with the involvement of the entire educational community, with a view to the effectiveness of the school institution and educational success. Today, more than ever, schools are required to help build a more just and supportive society, which requires everyone, especially teachers, to engage in the education of responsible citizens with the skills and competences to enable them to decide and participate in the community destinations in which they operate.

In this regard, Pacheco (2000) states that, with current decentralization policies, the school becomes simultaneously a national, regional and local territory. It further states that, within this multiplicity of decision-making aspects, the school can only become more politically autonomous if it builds and operates its own identity project (educational project) and if it works in partnership.

In summary, the message we want to highlight is that the need for curriculum autonomy that enables teachers to adapt the proposed curriculum at national level to the characteristics and needs of the students and the school context, which we defend here, can constitute a

pedagogical path that facilitates and instigates more meaningful learning for the students and, therefore, can promote their educational success.

5. Final Considerations

The legal framework in force in Angola stipulates a model centered on the configuration of educational policy and autonomy, although it contemplates not negligible margins of creative intervention, autonomy and innovation of school microstructures. The teacher is therefore the promoter of the whole curriculum decision and the driver of change, allowing him to adapt the prescribed curriculum to the educational needs of the school and the pupils within the ambit of its implementation, putting it into a contextualized format which involves creative and autonomous curriculum management. However, only autonomous organizations have the ability to produce their own projects, as only they have the freedom to choose and decide, allowing them to adapt the official discourse expressed to the local contexts and resources available to the school to build higher quality paths.

Although there are still pedagogical practices that are at odds with the constant contributions to the legislation, the attitude of the central administration reflects, albeit timidly and implicitly, the intention of a greater transfer of powers to the curriculum operational contexts. Thus teachers in the collegiate framework are encouraged to constantly reflect on their pedagogical practices, modifying whatever they consider necessary, refining their work and making daily choices for the best, not unwittingly, but with the certainty that, if there are attempts at an opening in the legislation, there is hope. If there is hope, there is a possibility of change.

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