

# Portuguese rural teachers' cultural competencies

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## Abstract

Considering the cultural specificities of the rural area, cultural competencies of teachers who teach in this context are a critical factor of the quality of rural teaching and learning. This study aimed to assess the degree of mastery, valorisation and necessity of the cultural competencies of rural teachers in Portugal. A questionnaire on teachers' competencies and knowledge was given to a sample of rural teachers in Portugal who mostly teach in classes with 12 to 14-year-old students. They responded to the questions on a subscale of cultural competencies. Their answers were analysed in terms of trends, variations and differences between mastery and valorisation of competences. The overall results show that mastery of cultural competencies lies between low and medium (on the scale: none – low – medium – high) and valorisation tends to be significantly higher than mastery, located between medium and high. The results confirm that cultural competencies are necessary for the rural teachers who answered the questionnaire. The teachers need to develop these skills (considering that they report deficient mastery) through a specifically designed training programme.

## Keywords

Cultural competencies, rural culture, rural education.

*Original reception:* 21st of april of 2020

*Acceptance:* 27th of july of 2020

*Publication:* 16th of december of 2020

## Introduction

Being rural territories characterized by a specific («less-observable») culture, along with a wide («manifest») cultural variability –borrowing the dichotomy from Hall (1976)– a 'rural culture' is assimilated into the identity of individuals living in that territory (Hardré *et al.*, 2009), acting as a kind of 'software' for the mind (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) and affecting learning as well (Hofstede, 1986). Therefore, teachers' that work on rural territories (many of which are not locals) need to be aware of their students' cultural referents and articulate teaching with such referents.

Besides its specific manifestations (*e.g.*, local folk art, rituals, games or language), rural culture tends to be characterized by a specific pattern of ideas, feelings and values, often contrasted with the ones of urban culture. Family, stability and local roots are typically more valued (Howley, Harmon & Leopold, 1996), along with local occupational skills, such as farming and fishing, (Woodrum, 2004). There is higher solidarity and closer personal relationships (Nachtigal, 1982), with denser and livelier associative networks that tend to nurture the connection of individuals to the community (Khattari *et al.*, 1997). Verbal communication and the recipient of messages tend to be more valued and there is a different

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sense of time, typically measured by the seasons of the year (Nachtigal, 1982). A sense of place is more valued (Khatti *et al.*, 1997) and informal community decision-making mechanisms are more highly rated (Khatti *et al.*, 1997), along with enterprise and self-sufficiency. Besides, hard work, stewardship, frugality and traditional values are typically more favoured in rural areas (Nachtigal, 1982).

As teaching in rural schools involves dealing with students (and schools and communities) with specific cultural (rural) referents, often distinct from the teacher's (typically urban) referents, teachers working in such context need to have *cultural competency* (CC) - *i.e.*, the ability to teach students from cultures different from their own (Moule, 2012). In fact, the frequent mismatch between teaching and students' cultural referents has negative effects on learning (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011), hampering the construction of meaning (Au & Jordan, 1981) and increasing the probability of underachievement (Ogbu, 1992). Oppositely, school engagement is increased, learning is facilitated, and academic achievement is promoted when learning activities are culturally significant and related with student's culture (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Byrd, 2016; Moule, 2012). In particular, this kind of education tends to have a positive impact on students': motivation (*e.g.*, Bui & Fagan, 2013); interest in the content (*e.g.*, Martell, 2013); positive academic self-concept (*e.g.*, Byrd, 2016); and critical analysis (*e.g.*, Choi, 2013).

As such, teacher's CC operationalizes a *Cultural Relevant Education*, which is a form of inclusive education focused on teaching culturally diverse students (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Dover, 2013). There are two main approaches to this kind of education. The first approach is known as *Cultural Responsive Teaching* (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2010), which emphasizes the need to recognize, accept and integrate students' cultures in the teaching-learning context. The second approach is known as *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1994), which is oriented to students' empowerment through a teaching based on their cultural referents. Nevertheless, as defended by Moule (2012), any kind of *Cultural Relevant Education* should involve a negotiation between students' cultural referents and what teachers consider as meaningful education, which most of all should make sense to the former.

Specifically, CC comprehends a set of attitudes and skills bellow analysed in a non-exhaustive way.

In the line with Bennett (1993), CC comprises an attitude of *cultural relativism* (*i.e.*, supporting that every culture has a relative value), in contrast with one of *cultural absolutism* (*i.e.*, advocating that a particular culture has a supreme value), as defined by Howard (1993). Additionally, CC implies a valorisation of cultural differences (Gay, 2013), involving an awareness of one's cultural referents and their difference to the students' referents, known and appreciated by the teacher (Byrd, 2016; Moule, 2012).

At the level of the determination of educational objectives CC involves a possible adaptation of those goals to students' cultural values (Moule, 2012). Besides aiming for students to recognize and value their own culture, CC also aims for them to have access to a broader culture (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Moreover, it aims to mobilize students towards forms of multicultural activism (Banks & Banks, 2010).

Considering the curriculum, CC entails teaching contents related with students' culture, allowing a socialization in their own culture (Byrd, 2016). Besides, it can involve

approaching the same topics from the perspective of different cultures (e.g., the «discovery» of America accordingly to the white culture and the native one) (Banks & Banks, 2010). Moreover, by comprising teaching contents related with other cultures, CC allows the development of knowledge and tolerance for other people's cultural values (Byrd, 2016), thus integrating the teaching of cultural skills (Aronson & Laughter, 2015).

Attending to teaching methods, CC involves using and relating students' cultural knowledge and experiences with curricular contents, in the line of a student-centred *constructivist* practice of *authentic learning* (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Byrd, 2016). This implies a variety of pedagogical procedures like: bringing the outside context into the classroom and sending students for learning in the community (Byrd, 2016); adapting the teaching mode to students' cultural based learning mode (Moule, 2012); or using educational practices which are typical in students' culture (Moule, 2012).

## Research questions and objective

The rural territory presents cultural specificities that act as references for local students, families and communities and with which rural schoolteachers (many of which are not locals) are confronted and challenged. Those teacher's CC become therefore a critical factor of the quality of rural teaching and learning. Considering this problem, the present study interrogates the mastery, valorization and need of CC by teachers who teach in Portuguese rural schools, a subject that we are not aware of having been investigated previously. Knowledge on this will allow to: characterize a professional group little studied regarding CC, which is considered critic in a context with cultural specificities; explore the possible need for teacher's training in CC, which can contribute to improve rural students' achievement and thus rural environment's consolidation and rural education visibility.

Following the research questions, the objective of this study is to assess the degree of mastery, valorization and need (difference between mastery and valorization) of a set of considered relevant cultural competencies by Portuguese rural teachers.

## Method

In order to achieve the study's objectives, the answers of a sample of rural teachers to the *Cultural Competencies Subscale*, from the purposely developed *Questionnaire on Rural Teachers' Competencies and Knowledge – QRTCK* (Fundació Món Rural, 2019), translated and pre-tested for Portuguese, was analyzed.

## Participants

The sample ( $N = 161$ ) consists of teachers working in schools inserted in the Portuguese rural context (Alto Alentejo region). 91 are female (79.1%) and 24 are male (20.9%), 26 and 63 years ( $M = 48.42$ ;  $SD = 7.52$ ), teaching mostly (59.1%) in the third cycle of education and with work experience in rural schools between zero and 34 years ( $M = 10.06$ ;  $SD = 10.19$ ).

## QRTCK's cultural competencies subscale

The QRTCK consists of three parts: A *Sociodemographic Scale* (to collect information on gender, age, tetched degree of education, and years of teaching in rural context), a *Knowledge Scale* and a *Competencies Scale*. The response to the items of these last two scales involves indicating the degree of mastery and the degree of valorization for each competence or knowledge described in the items, in a scale of 4 points (1-nothing; 2-reduced; 3-median; 4-high).

The *Knowledge Scale* comprises a total of 27 items, which describe different knowledge about the rural context (alpha of mastery = .98; alpha of valorization = .99). A total of 17 items of this scale constitute a *Knowledge of Culture and Art Subscale* (in Annex) that evaluates knowledge about local rural culture and art (alpha of mastery = .97; alpha of valorization = .98)<sup>1</sup>.

The *Competencies Scale* comprises a total of 30 items, which describe different significant teaching-related competencies in rural context (alpha of mastery = .97; alpha of valorization = .98)<sup>2</sup>. A total of nine items of this scale comprise a *Cultural Competencies Subscale*, (alpha of mastery = .94; alpha of valorization = .94)<sup>3</sup>, which addresses the competencies to: consider the cultural characteristics of rural territory in teaching planning (item 2); relate the curricular content with students' previous knowledge of rural territory's culture (item 10); pedagogically use the cultural resources offered by the rural territory - along with the natural, material and social resources (item 17); develop students' knowledge on the local rural culture (item 14) and on the cultural diversity of the rural territory (item 8); evaluate learning on local rural culture (item 22); assume the rural territory's cultural development as a school's objective (item 25); commit to community's sociocultural initiatives (item 26); and use the school as a local community's cultural space (item 30). The specific items of this subscale can be found in Annex. Concurrent validity of the *Cultural Competencies Subscales* is testified by its high and significant correlation with *Knowledge of Culture and Art Subscale* ( $r = .62$ ;  $p = .00$  for mastery;  $r = .77$ ;  $p = .00$  for valorization).

## Data collection procedure

The questionnaire was made available online and answered anonymously, under informed consent, between May 2018 and March 2019. The project was approved by a deontological commission of an academic institution.

## Data analysis procedure

Descriptive statistics (i.e., mean and standard deviation) were performed for the total and for each item of the *Cultural Competencies Subscale* (for both mastery and valorization). Moreover, differences between mastery's and valorization's means, for the total and each item, were calculated and mean comparison *t tests* were performed. All calculus was made using the IBM SPSS Statistics 24 program.

(1) All item-total correlations are higher than .70 and no item withdrawal increases the alpha.

(2) All psychometric statistics are related only to the sample presented in this study.

(3) All item-total correlations are higher than .63 and no item withdrawal increases the alpha.

## Results

Results relating to the sample's responses to *Cultural Competencies Subscale* can be found in table 1.

**Table 1. Responses to cultural competencies subscale (N=161)**

| Items | Mastery |     | Valorization |     | MMast - MVal |
|-------|---------|-----|--------------|-----|--------------|
|       | M       | SD  | M            | SD  |              |
| 2     | 2.87    | .82 | 3.35         | .68 | -.48         |
| 8     | 3.07    | .84 | 3.56         | .64 | -.49         |
| 10    | 3.06    | .80 | 3.54         | .62 | -.48         |
| 14    | 3.12    | .77 | 3.59         | .59 | -.47         |
| 17    | 3.06    | .84 | 3.57         | .58 | -.51         |
| 22    | 2.76    | .88 | 3.28         | .78 | -.52         |
| 25    | 2.72    | .86 | 3.30         | .70 | -.48         |
| 26    | 2.87    | .85 | 3.35         | .71 | -.48         |
| 30    | 2.91    | .86 | 3.44         | .70 | -.53         |
| Total | 2.94    | .68 | 3.44         | .55 | -.50         |

Note: T= All items;  $M_{\text{Mast}} - M_{\text{Val}}$  = difference between M of mastery and M of valorization

Considering the average values of items correspondent to mastery of cultural competencies (table 1) the results vary between 2.72 (between 2. *reduced* and 3. *median*, in the scale: 1. *nothing* - 2. *reduced* - 3. *median* - 4. *high*) and 3.12 (slightly higher than 3. *median*), with most items presenting an average between 2. *reduced* and 3. *median*. Considering the subscale, competencies' mastery is 2.94 (between 2. *reduced* and 3. *median*). Attending to the standard deviation values item's results vary between .77 and .88, with a result of .68 for the subscale.

On the other hand, considering the average values of items correspondent to valorization of cultural competencies (table 1) the results vary between 3.28 (slightly above 3. *median*) and 3.59 (between 3. *median* and 4. *high*), with all items presenting an average between 3. *median* and 4. *high*. Considering the subscale, competencies' valorization is 3.44 (between 3. *median* and 4. *high*). Attending to the standard deviation values item's results vary between .58 and .71, with a result of .55 for the subscale.

Given the differences between mastery and valorization means (table 1), these are negative for all items, varying between -.47 and -.53. Considering the subscale, this difference is -.50 and statistically significant;  $t(160) = -10.67$ ;  $p = .00$

## Discussion

Although the results cannot be generalized with confidence to the global Portuguese population of rural teachers' (since they concern a small sample from one of several rural national regions), they might reflect the wide-ranging national reality regarding rural teachers' valorization and perceptions of mastery of cultural competencies, along with their needs in relation to these competencies.

In general, results show that although the inquired rural teachers valorize cultural competencies, they perceive themselves with a significant lower mastery of those same competencies. This suggests those teachers are aware of the cultural specificity of the rural contexts where they teach and of an interiorized ideal to articulate their teaching with this same specificity. Nevertheless, it also suggests an awareness of a deficit in such articulation, which replicates the typical (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011) general mismatch between teachers' performance and students' culture. Since such mismatch constitutes a risk factor for learning and achievement (Au & Jordan, 1981; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Ogbu, 1992), while these are favoured when teaching is aligned students' culture (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Byrd, 2016; Moule, 2012), the results suggest the need of training those rural teachers on cultural competencies. Considering the specific competencies evaluated, results suggest that such training should focus in developing competencies of: contemplating the local territory's cultural characteristics when planning teaching; linking the curricular content with students' culture; employing the local territory's cultural resources; developing students' knowledge on the local culture and cultural diversity; aiming the local territory's cultural development; binding to community's sociocultural initiatives; and of using the school as a local community's cultural space.

Future studies that devote to develop and test rural teachers training in cultural competencies are needed, along with others that assess such competencies in representative samples, with direct observational measures and from students' perspective. Furthermore, there is a need for studies that explore the relation between rural teachers' level of CC and their students' leaning and achievement.

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## Annex

### *Knowledge of Culture and Art Subscale*

- 1 Knowledge of local literature (short stories, children's songs, songs or poems).
- 2 Knowledge of local proverbs.
- 3 Knowledge of local mythology (legends, myths or riddles).
- 4 Knowledge of local rituals (practices).
- 5 Knowledge of local beliefs.
- 6 Knowledge of local games.
- 7 Knowledge of local gastronomic traditions.
- 8 Knowledge of local music.
- 9 Knowledge of local dances.
- 10 Knowledge of local theater.
- 11 Knowledge of the dexterities related to local crafts.
- 13 Knowledge of local festive events.
- 16 Knowledge of local cultural institutions.
- 23 Knowledge of local mobile artistic heritage (paintings, sculptures, crafts, musical instruments, clothing or embroidery, etc.).
- 24 Knowledge of local non-artistic mobile cultural heritage (coins, weapons or manuscripts, etc.).
- 25 Knowledge of local still cultural heritage (architecture, monuments or archaeological sites, etc.).
- 27 Knowledge of the local underground/underwater cultural heritage (ruins, remains of ships, etc.).

### *Cultural Competencies Subscales*

- 2 Consider, in teacher planning, the cultural characteristics of rural territory.
- 8 Develop students' knowledge on the rural territory's cultural diversity.
- 10 Relate contents with students' previous knowledge on rural territory's culture.
- 14 Develop activities to promote students' knowledge of local culture.
- 17 Use rural territory's resources (cultural, social, material and natural) for teaching.
- 22 Assess students' learnings of local culture.
- 25 Having as a school's objective the cultural development of rural territory.
- 26 Commit to community sociocultural initiatives.
- 30 Using the school as a cultural space of the local community.



## *Les competències culturals dels mestres rurals portuguesos*

*Resum:* Tenint en compte les especificitats culturals del territori rural, les competències culturals dels docents que ensenyen en aquest context són un factor crític de la qualitat de l'ensenyament i l'aprenentatge rural. En aquest marc, aquest estudi tenia com a objectiu avaluar el grau de domini, valorització i necessitat de competències culturals per part dels docents rurals portuguesos. Es van analitzar les respostes a una mostra de mestres rurals de Portugal, que majoritàriament fan classe a grups de joves d'entre 12 i 14 anys, a una subescala de competències culturals d'un qüestionari sobre competències i coneixements del professorat. Es van analitzar les dades en termes de tendències, variacions i diferències entre el domini i la valorització de les competències. Els resultats globals mostren que el domini de les competències culturals es troba entre baix i mitjà (en l'escala: res-reduït-mig-alt) i la seva valorització tendeix a ser significativament superior al seu domini, situant-se entre els valors de mig i alt. Els resultats confirmen que les competències culturals són necessàries per als mestres rurals enquestats i que aquests docents cal que les desenvolupin (considerant que el seu informe sobre el seu domini és deficient), mitjançant una formació dissenyada amb intenció.

*Paraules clau:* Competències culturals, cultura rural, educació rural.

## *Les compétences culturelles des enseignants ruraux portugais*

*Résumé:* Compte tenu des spécificités culturelles du territoire rural, les compétences culturelles des enseignants qui exercent dans ce contexte sont un facteur critique de la qualité de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage rural. Dans ce cadre, la présente étude avait pour objectif d'évaluer le degré de maîtrise, de valorisation et de nécessité de compétences culturelles de la part des enseignants ruraux portugais. Les réponses d'un échantillon d'enseignants ruraux du Portugal ont été analysées, dont la grande majorité fait cours à des groupes de jeunes âgés entre 12 et 14 ans, selon une sous-échelle de compétences culturelles d'un questionnaire sur les compétences et les connaissances du corps enseignant. Les données ont été analysées en termes de tendances, de variations et de différences entre la maîtrise et la valorisation des compétences. Les résultats globaux montrent que la maîtrise des compétences culturelles se situe à un niveau entre bas et moyen (selon l'échelle : inexistant-réduit-moyen-élevé) et que leur valorisation tend à être significativement supérieure à leur maîtrise, le niveau se situant entre moyen et élevé. Les résultats confirment que les compétences culturelles sont nécessaires pour les enseignants ruraux interrogés et que ces enseignants doivent les développer (le niveau de celles-ci étant déficient, d'après le rapport sur la maîtrise de ces compétences), au moyen d'une formation conçue avec une finalité concrète.

*Mots clés:* Compétences culturelles, culture rurale, éducation rurale.

## *Las competencias culturales de los maestros rurales portugueses*

*Resumen:* Considerando las especificidades culturales del territorio rural, las competencias culturales de los docentes que enseñan en este contexto son un factor crítico de la calidad de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje rural. En este marco, este estudio tuvo como objetivo evaluar el grado de dominio, valorización y necesidad de competencias culturales por parte de los docentes rurales portugueses. Se analizaron las respuestas de una muestra de docentes rurales de Portugal, que enseñan principalmente a clases con alumnos de 12-14 años, a una subescala de competencias culturales de un cuestionario sobre las competencias y el conocimiento de los docentes. Los datos se analizaron en términos de tendencias, variaciones y diferencias entre el dominio y la valorización de las competencias. Teniendo en cuenta los resultados generales, el dominio de las competencias culturales se encuentra entre los ítems inferiores y mediano (en la escala: nada-reducido-mediano-alto) y su valorización tiende a ser significativamente mayor que su dominio, situándose entre mediana y alta. Los resultados confirman que las competencias culturales son necesarias para los docentes rurales encuestados y que esos docentes deben desarrollarlas (considerando que su informe de su dominio es deficiente), a través de una capacitación diseñada a propósito.

*Palabras clave:* Competencias culturales, cultura rural, educación rural