

INTERVIEW NUNO CRATO

'Reading and maths first'

You cannot improve the quality of education just with more teachers, resources, or money. Better teaching, more ambition in the curriculum, and evaluation are key, says Nuno Crato, the man who turned the tide in Portugal.

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Nuno Crato: 'There are good schools in poorer neighbourhoods, and less good schools in richer neighbourhoods.' Titus Simoens

Due to the focus on the teacher shortage, lists of complaints and advice are pouring in, to make the profession more attractive. Crucial in this debate is the focus on quality. 'The teacher shortage is a symptom of declining educational quality,' said education manager Tim Surma (Thomas More) in an interview with *De Tijd*. But can we improve our education? Today the report of the Brinckman Committee is presented with a series of proposals. This weekend at ResearchEd, an international conference that aims to bridge the gap between scientific research and the classroom, a man who proved that quality improvement is not impossible was present. 'On the classroom floor, and only there, the difference is made,' said Nuno Crato (69) on the margins of the conference.

Crato is an outsider. He is the statistics professor who in 2011, without a party card, suddenly became Minister of Education in Portugal. Since 2000 he has immersed himself in educational literature. He often thought what he read was nonsense, 'as a mathematician, but also as a rational person'. Crato increasingly publicly opposed certain dominant romantic and unscientific ideas. When the prime minister was on the phone with him during the full financial

crisis, he was given the opportunity to turn the tide. Successfully. Portugal advanced in the rankings of international studies such as Pisa and Timss, and was stamped as the 'new Finland'. The country is an interesting case for Flemish education in several respects.

What is the secret of Portuguese success?

Nuno Crato: 'There is no secret at all. First, there is a need for a strict and ambitious curriculum - as in everything in life, we need clear goals and a clear focus. Second, there is a need for evaluation and responsibility.'

Where should the focus be?

'First things first. The first emphasis should be on language (reading and writing) and math, the rest needs it. Research shows that a good foundation increases the hunger for other subjects – such as history or science. Being able to read well leads to more background knowledge in other domains. And there is no evidence that other subjects, such as geography or history, suffer from poor attention given to mathematics or reading.'

Was the focus not good then?

'In theory, the focus was on making children happy and allowing students to develop themselves. This is not based on solid scientific research. Also, starting from the interests of children or phenomena hardly works.'

Strikingly, in Portugal inequality narrowed until 2015, after which it started to increase again.

'Often, people believe that lowering the bar leads to equal equity. I completely disagree. It is a false opposition (to strive for quality is not opposed to the goal of reducing inequalities). Everyone benefits with an ambitious curriculum. This line was discontinued after 2015. What we now see: the weakest in society and students with problems at school are losing ground.'

What is the role of the government?

'The government must set and evaluate clear goals. This is crucial. From a certain point on, more money, resources or teachers are no longer a solution. Only more focus helps.'

'It is crucial that schools should be given maximum freedom to find their way'

It is crucial that schools should be given maximum freedom to find their way. The autonomy strengthens schools and teachers, and gives them the responsibility to increase education quality. If the government is concerned with the details, this is a (seemingly) comfortable position: you just have to wait for orders and at the end of the day you can say they weren't good enough.'

In Flanders there will soon be central tests. You are a big fan of testing.

'Absolutely. Every country benefits (with assessment). Without information, as a government, school, parent, or teacher you remain in the dark. Standardized and uniform testing, in combination with a strong curriculum, has the advantage of clarity. That is not only useful for teachers, but also for parents and makers of handbooks.'

In Portugal the results are public. In Flanders, they just want to avoid that (rankings).

'Why? A ranking is simply a by-product of evaluation. (Not the important thing). In Portugal, the results were made public after the government was forced to do so. There was a lot of discussion, but the publication did lead to the realization that something had to change in education and that schools had to take responsibility. That change was crucial in the turnaround.'

Don't those rankings weigh too much in the choice of the parents?

'Isn't that a good thing that parents want to send their child to the best schools? And results are not fatalistic. Any school can improve. There are very good schools in poorer neighbourhoods, there are no good schools in richer neighbourhoods.'

Is there no danger of an overload in the curriculum?

'If you ask teachers and students whether there is too much in the curriculum, the answer is often yes. I think it's rarely too much, provided it's clear and focused. And I believe that it is better to have an in-depth knowledge of a few subjects than a superficial knowledge of many subjects.'

What is the value of these international surveys (PISA, TIMSS...) for you?

'In the end they remain a (useful!) measurement. But it cannot be otherwise. Take the driving test. There, it is checked whether you know the rules and can drive without hitting buildings. Does it make you a good driver? No. But it's a start. This is also the case with international surveys. Being able to read or calculate well is no guarantee of success, but it is a start. Moreover, tests only measure what can be measured. Again: they don't test during the driving test whether you can limit alcohol consumption when you drive, while this is perhaps the most important...'