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Overcoming School Underachievement: A View On Strategies Of “Student Grouping”

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Problematic: Reducing Early School Leaving In Europe



- Social inclusion of children and young people is a central concern of the European educational policy. The reduction of early school leaving (ESL) in Europe, to less than 10%, by 2020, is seen as a way to prevent unemployment, poverty and social exclusion (EC, 2010).
 - The multidimensional processes that lead to school underachievement (SU) dropout and ESL are complex, involving:
 - institutional and
 - social contexts
 - family and
 - individual factors
- School disengagement is often used as an «umbrella concept» that, in a way, shelters most of the complexity of those processes.
(Ferguson et al. 2005; Dale 2010; Costa et al. 2013)

Controversies: Reducing Early School Leaving



- In Portugal, as in other European countries, in the last decades, several policies, programs and practices have been developed to tackle the problem (RESL.eu, 2014; Araújo et al., 2013).
- Aware of the complexity of ESL problematic, it is important to look at pervasive controversies regarding some dimensions of the measures developed to promote the said change (Dias, 2013; Antunes & Barros, 2014; Sá & Antunes, 2012).

Educating Places: Practices, Voices and Pathways of Inclusive Education



- The EDUPLACES project aims to identify and characterize social-educational practices that contribute to an inclusive education, and at the same time are successful in overcoming school failure and drop out.

One of EDUPLACES' research questions:

- From the implicated actors' point of view, which processes and factors, rationales and (institutional, community, local) partnerships contribute to building inclusive social-educational practices.

Methodology

- Qualitative approach using a wide range of techniques, including quantitative ones (Seale et al., 2004).
 - Multi-case study
 - Eleven units of observation
 - Four Portuguese municipalities
 - Three phases/years
 - Team of four Centers/Universities (UMinho, UPorto, UTAD and UAlgarve)
- Focused in the context of two different national Programs designed to tackle SU and ESL:
 - A program developed in schools
 - A program based on local community projects

Outcomes: First year of EDUPLACES project



- In each of the eleven observation units, both identification and characterization of inclusive and successful practices were performed by means of interviews to program leaders and document analysis.
- Major milestones:
 1. Panel of Inclusive Practices – Phase/year 1 (June 2016-May/2017)
 2. Portfolio of Inclusive Practices - Phase/year 1 (June 2016-May/2017)

Typology of inclusive practices

- A cross-sectional analysis of the eleven practices led to a first approach to the construction of a typology of inclusive practices:
 - Ability Grouping (3 Practices),
 - Study Support (4 Practices),
 - Mediation (3 Practices),
 - Pedagogical Differentiation (1 Practice).

Ability Grouping

- The presenting study is based on three practices of ability grouping type from a total of six school-based practices.
- There are many different definitions and empirical approaches of ability grouping (Loveless, 2013).
- We witness a resurgence of ability grouping and the term “differential instruction” is been use to define grouping students by prior achievement or skills level (Loveless, 2013).

Ability Grouping

- Ability grouping, or homogeneous grouping, is the separation of same-grade school children into groups or classes based on school aptitude. Grouping may occur based on test scores or school records of grades (Kulik, 1992).
- Ability grouping, in schools context, consists in the organization of groups of students, with relative homogeneity of academic performance, in the expectation the pedagogical action is more effective (Antunes et al, 2017).

Ability Grouping

- In the 1970s and 1980s, a barrage of studies criticized ability grouping.
- Issues with ability grouping include its impact on self-esteem, effectiveness of instruction and equity among minority groups (Slavin, 1992).
- Nonetheless, this type is found in several national programs and is pointed out by institutional leaders as successful in improvement students achievement.

How it is organized

- Practice 1
 - Focused on broader dimensions
 - One class (from 5th to 9th grade)
 - Supported by increased human resources; with personal and professional characteristics that favor the pedagogical relationship and learning.
- Practice 2
 - Focused on nuclear subjects
 - “Mother “ classes/ “Nest” groups (from 1st to 9th grade)
 - Students are placed in classes where they are expected to complete several curricular years.

How it is organized

- Practice 3
 - Focused on nuclear subjects
 - Three classes coming from three “Mother” classes (from 5th to 6th grade)
 - Homogeneous groups are formed in specific subjects, temporary or last the entire school year, keeping the students in the classes of origin in the remaining subjects.

Target group: elementary school students. Usually students from low socioeconomic levels.

Featured Strategies/Processes/Resources

- Early diagnosis
- Formation of special classes
- Differentiation/more personalized work
- Addition and specific selection of teachers, collaborative work, increase of support of technicians
- Flexibilization of curricula, schedules and classes
- Monitoring/evaluation

(source: Institutional leaders and document analyses)

Indicated Outcomes

From the perspective of institutional representatives the advantages of ability grouping are:

- Improvements (variables) in student outcomes (learning, social behavior, integration, autonomy);
- Improvements in collaborative work (although with initial resistance), teacher-student relationships, inter-institutional articulation and teacher training.

Brief Summary



- Curricular and organizational flexibility, which includes processes of grouping/regrouping non-static students.
- Increase in human resources (teachers and other technicians, e.g. psychologists), more or less elaborate forms of collaborative work seem to be a common feature of these 3 practices.
- In addition to the collaborative work, in one of the practices, the references to peer supervision and the repercussions that this dynamic has on teachers and on the school.

Final Remarks

- The perspective of coordinators and the analysis of data seems to embrace the opinions of Kulik (1992), Slavin (1992), as well as the opinions of proponents of ability grouping, indicating that these practices allow teachers to work closely with the students and tailor the pace and content of instruction to students' needs, improving (in several different ways) student achievements.
- In practice one, there are some evidences supported by documental data analysis that relativize the improvement of student achievements and enlightens on the risk of connotation-labeling issues, which according to Slavin (1992), can affect self-esteem of those students in the lowest achieving groups.

Final Remarks



- Overall, it still not clear the degree of normative success and if that success reflects the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes corresponding to the level of education that these students attend.
- The three ability grouping practices may have different results in the studied groups that should be read carefully, either from the effectiveness in achieve the intended result, or in particular in the equality of opportunities to access to knowledge.
- The upcoming steps of EDUPLACES are to continuing to listen multi-actor (youth, families and other community members, teachers/other school staff and members of partners organizations) perspectives on these socio-educational practices and understand what are their outlook on this subject.

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Thanks for your attention!



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