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Student Grouping: Investigating a Socio-Educational Practice in a Public School in Portugal

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Abstract: Social inclusion of children and young people and the curbing of school failure, dropout, and early school leaving is are central concerns of the European educational policy and are seen as means to prevent unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. In Portugal, as in other European countries, to address this issue, several programs have been designed and developed. This article aims to investigate how teachers, technicians, and parents involved in a socio-educational practice of student grouping envisage processes that contribute to overcoming school failure, dropout, and early school leaving. This qualitative case study took place in a Portuguese municipality within a school-based nationwide intervention programme. From the voices of the educational agents consulted, some vectors of institutional, dispositional, and situational dimensions were identified that contribute to overcoming 'barriers to access and participation in education', which promote some changes among students at an individual level. The research findings highlight processes, factors, and logics of action that allow teachers to work closely with their students and tailor the pace and curriculum contents to their needs, thereby enhancing students' academic performance.

Keywords: school failure and dropout; early school leaving; socio-educational practices; student grouping; public school

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1. Introduction and Background

In the context of the problem of school disaffection, early school leaving is considered to be the culmination of a complex journey that needs to be addressed (Costa et al. 2013). Early school leaving is often the result of a combination of strongly interconnected factors that lead to cumulative disadvantage (Cerdà-Navarro et al. 2020; Albuquerque et al. 2022). Thus, the relationship between school failure and dropout has favoured a conceptual change in the term dropout, which is now understood as the result of a process and not just as a dichotomous term: dropout/integration (Estevão and Álvares 2013). This problem has become increasingly important in the European political agenda, as well as in national education policies, and is considered a reference in the definition of educational, social, and economic policies (Araújo et al. 2020), taking into account the civic, social, and economic consequences, such as unemployment, social exclusion, and poverty (OECD 2018).

In recent decades, Europe and Portugal have seen an upsurge in public education policies, programmes, and practices aimed at overcoming school failure and dropout. These educational policies reflect several formulations inspired by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Conferences on Education for All, that, over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, proposed, among other things, the condition of universal access to education and the promotion of equity through the premise of Education for All (Martín-Bermúdez and Moreno-Fernandez 2022).

Socio-educational practices are focused on processes that aim to reduce or overcome barriers to learning and participation to promote academic success and social inclusion

for all students (Antunes and Lúcio 2019). In this sense, the EDUPLCES project set out to investigate factors that contribute to interrupting the cycle of school failure, dropout, and early school leaving that favour educational remobilisation by analysing practices, voices, and pathways for inclusive education. The project comprised a multi-case study of ten units of observation, involving a team of eighteen researchers from four Portuguese universities, conducted over three phases/years. In each unit of observation, a socio-educational practice was developed within the scope of two national intervention programmes (one school-based and the other community-based). One of the research questions that the project set out to investigate concerned, from the point of view of the actors involved, which processes and factors interrupt the school failure–dropout cycle and favour a remobilisation towards education.

Previous research has shown that socio-educational practices, resulting from public policy guidelines developed through the work of educational organisations, represent a response to social and school inequalities (UB/CREA and UM/UEA 2006; Antunes 2019; Rodrigues et al. 2023). Some investigations focus on the study of successful socio-educational practices in preventing and/or overcoming school failure and dropout (Ross 2009; Edwards and Downes 2013; Antunes 2019), and other studies emphasise the importance of socio-educational practices in tackling barriers to learning, in formal and non-formal educational contexts, resulting from processes to promote social inclusion and school success (Antunes and Lúcio 2019; Antunes 2019; Rodrigues et al. 2020).

This study focuses on a specific socio-educational practice of student grouping,[1] developed in a school context that involves organising groups of students with relative homogeneity based on academic performance (Antunes 2017). The practice is part of a national programme aimed at overcoming school failure, dropout, and early school leaving, whose objectives include improving the quality of learning reflected in the educational success of students and, in overcoming school failure and dropout, creating conditions that favour educational guidance and a school-to-work qualified transition.

Based on a theoretical framework that discusses these barriers, conceptual instruments were used to investigate analytical dimensions to understand the socio-educational practice studied. These barriers are perceived as factors that favour exclusion (Ekstrom 1972) and that can act in various arrangements and with different configurations. Ekstrom (1972) suggested a theorisation of 'barriers to access and participation in education' system that comprises (i) institutional barriers (internal to the institutions, such as admission practices, the educational offer, or staff attitudes); (ii) situational barriers (specific life situations that comprise social expectations and pressures or family responsibilities); and (iii) dispositional barriers (which comprise fear of failure, attitude towards intellectual activity, educational goals, academic aspirations, and expectations of the subjects) (Ekstrom 1972). The main objective of this investigation aims to investigate how teachers, technicians, and parents involved in a socio-educational practice of student grouping envisage processes that contribute to overcoming school failure, dropout, and early school leaving.

The paper begins by outlining a theoretical framework on the socio-educational practices of student grouping, then it presents the student grouping practice, analysing its structure and describing its specific features (target group of students, organisation, strategies, processes, and resources). Subsequently, the methodological options and procedures that guided the data collection are described, followed by an interpretative analysis and discussion, as well as an explanation of the conclusions derived from the reflections on the findings.

1.1. Student Grouping Practices

There are several definitions and empirical approaches to student grouping practices (Smale-Jacobse et al. 2019; Boliver and Capsada-Munsech 2021; Kharel 2021). Kulik (1992), based on programmes and practices tested over more than one hundred years, identified five modalities of grouping students: (i) XYZ classes—level classes formed on the basis of students' academic performance, usually distributed into three levels: high (X)-,

medium (Y)-, and low (Z)-level classes; (ii) inter-class grouping—students coming from different heterogeneous classes are grouped into homogeneous groups only for certain subjects, for example, Mother Tongue and Mathematics; (iii) intra-class grouping—within a heterogeneous class, the students are organised into sub-groups that are homogeneous in terms of academic performance in certain subjects; (iv) accelerated classes for gifted students—students with exceptional abilities are grouped together in a class that progresses through the curriculum at its own pace, being able, for example, to work on two years' worth of curriculum content in one year; (v) enriched curriculum classes for gifted students—students progress through the common curriculum at the same pace as other classes, but, in addition to the common curriculum, part of the school day is dedicated to exploring other more challenging content, for example, foreign language conversation, research activities, music, etc. For Kulik (1992), the effectiveness of these different modes of allocating students depends on the extent to which grouping is combined with curricular adjustments in the pedagogical materials used by the teachers.

The diversification of configurations and meanings of the term student grouping materialises into an important challenge in the debate on these educational practices. In the 1970s and 1980s, this strategy to prevent and overcome school failure and dropout was criticised in different studies, emphasising the negative impacts on the quality of teaching, on equal opportunities to access knowledge, and on students' self-esteem (Archer et al. 2018; Kharel 2021). However, other research indicates that teachers have positive attitudes towards these practices (Linchevski and Kutscher 1998) and that student grouping enables adapting the pace and content to the level of the group and to the students' needs with higher and lower skills and knowledge (Kulik 1992). Some authors, such as Steenbergen-Hu et al. (2016) and Kharel (2021) state that the relationship between student grouping and academic performance can be beneficial for students from more advanced groups, with the opposite effect on more advanced, lower-achieving groups. Other authors, however, suggest that these issues with lower-achieving groups can be circumvented by improving teaching quality (Archer et al. 2018). For Kulik (1992), the inconsistency of the findings about this type of practice stems, partly, from a lack of thoroughness until the 1970s regarding the methodological procedures adopted and a failure to properly differentiate students' grouping practices. According to the author, this variable is fundamental since the literature indicates that the different programmes have different effects on the students (e.g., little effect, no effect, or moderate effects (Sá and Veloso 2018)).

In recent years, we have seen a resurgence in this type of socio-educational practice, with the term differentiated instruction being used to define student grouping by levels of competence or performance (Taylor et al. 2022). In Portugal, particularly in the last decades, different practices of student grouping have been identified in national programmes and implemented under educational policies designed to tackle school failure, dropout, and early school leaving, which have had different impacts to address cultural and social diversity in schools. The Programme Educational Territories of Priority Intervention (TEIP) was established in 1996 by Normative Dispatch no. 147-B/ME/96, with the intention of overcoming school failure and promoting equal access to education for children and young people in schools characterised by vulnerable geographical locations at different levels—social, cultural, economic, and family (Barbieri 2003; Ferreira and Teixeira 2010)—through the implementation of positive discrimination measures under the influence of the Francophone policy of Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire (ZEP), the compensatory education programmes of the United States of America, and, in the same vein, British research from the late 1960s (Ferreira and Teixeira 2010; Ferraz et al. 2018). The TEIP I Programme ended in 1999 and was reformulated in 2006 through Normative Dispatch no. 55/2008, which created the second-generation programme (TEIP2), and Dispatch no. 20/2012, which originated the current third-generation programme (TEIP3) (MEC 2024). Each of the three phases of the TEIP programme has been extended and is currently (February 2024) implemented in 146 school clusters/ungrouped schools located in economically and socially disadvantaged areas where poverty and social exclusion, violence, indiscipline, and school dropout and

failure are prevalent. In Portugal, several studies have been carried out with the aim of reflecting on and analysing the effect of the TEIP programme in the contexts where it is developed. Of the research carried out, the research coordinated by Abrantes et al. (2011) reveals a positive effect of the programme in the territories covered, contributing towards a reduction in school failure and dropout rates. However, the study points out that the results show a certain gap between internal and external success, which is explained by the different indicators contained in these two types of assessment "while the national tests are restricted to the competences that students acquire through a written test (Mother Tongue and Mathematics), within a limited time frame, internal assessments are the result of a year's work, in the various subjects and considering knowledge, attitudes and values" (Abrantes et al. 2011, p. 34).

1.2. Student Grouping Practice: What, Where, When, How, Who?

The student grouping practice, located in the northeast of Portugal, has been operating since 2009 and was developed within the scope of a school project aimed at overcoming school failure, dropout, and early school leaving while promoting social and educational inclusion for children and young people, as is usually carried out in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts. It is focused on supporting improvements in learning by intervening in second-cycle[2] classes and targets students with learning difficulties but also with individual, social, and family difficulties identified by their teachers in the first cycle of primary education.

The practice consists in promoting differentiated pedagogical responses for classes in the same grade, providing more personalised and individualised support for students with difficulties, through the implementation of pedagogical pairs and the support of advisory teachers who work closely with class directors. It is designed for students in the second cycle of primary education in three at-risk classes, with the purpose of supporting the improvement of learning, preventing school failure, dropout, and early school leaving. Three groups are created from three "mother" classes that form homogeneous groups in specific subjects (Mother Tongue and Mathematics). These groups are flexible, and students' permanence in a group can be temporary or last the entire school year, with students remaining involved in the practice in their original classes in other subjects.

In addition to the students in the second cycle, each group comprises Mathematics teachers, Portuguese language teachers, and primary school teachers. Other occasional participants are technicians from the psychology services, the student support office, head teachers, and class teachers.

Some of the aspects to be highlighted in the implementation of the pedagogic experience are the reallocation of human resources and the cooperative development of teaching material and lessons.

2. Materials and Methods

The study follows a qualitative approach to capture the plurality of rationalities and meanings based on the knowledge and contexts being analysed (Seale 2004). This case study (Yin 2010) was conducted in a municipality in the north-east of Portugal. The investigation was carried out by a research sub-team through two focus groups (Greenbaum 1998), one aimed at teachers and technicians and the other at parents. Focus groups allow participants, on the one hand, to share their thoughts and feelings and, on the other, to raise new reflections and questions that can generate new reflective and theoretical frameworks on the part of the participants (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999).

The participants were selected according to two inclusion criteria: (1) being involved in the practice for at least one year and (2) willingness to participate in the focus group. The focus group with teachers and technicians included four participants with different roles (Coordinator of the Portuguese Language, Mathematics Coordinator, Portuguese Teacher, and Socio-Cultural Animator) with different periods of work experience in the practice, ranging from one to eight years. Five respondents took part in the focus group

with parents. All the participants in this focus group had at least one child attending the practice in the second cycle of primary school, with a length of time in the practice between one to two years.

The two focus groups, which took place on the school premises, were designed to last one hour, and followed a previously drawn-up script, with semi-open questions on the topic and the exposition of information. The scripts were reviewed and checked for accuracy by the authors. The empirical research was carried out by applying the instruments to teachers and technicians and then to parents. The focus groups were audiotaped, subject to consent, ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality, and then returned to participants for validation (SPCE 2020).

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the focus group, one with teachers and technicians and the other with parents, were previously transcribed verbatim (Bucholtz 2000) and subsequently subjected to a content analysis (Bardin 1995) to pinpoint a set of main categories (see Appendix A) that could capture the different views and perceptions expressed. The coding was organised on four central categories (institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers, listed in the 'Introduction' section of this paper, and effects of the practice), which allowed us to analyse the theoretical problem 'barriers to participation in learning and school' as dimensions of intervention that involve processes and factors that contribute to overcoming school failure and dropout. A category tree was created according to the theoretical and epistemological framework along with the initial insights gained from empirical research. Data analysis was triangulated, with the transcripts being cross-coded by four researchers. After categorisation procedures were defined, the analysis was carried out using NVivo12, which contributes to the organisation and structure of the data for more efficient analysis and exploration. All names of places, practice, and people involved are fictitious.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results and their discussion organised by categories of analysis, identified as institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers (Ekstrom 1972), regarding the main dimensions perceived by those involved in this study about the processes that contribute to overcoming 'barriers to access and participation in education'. Considering these three categories defined and the two sources analysed, i.e., two focus groups (one with teachers and a technician and one with parents), the perspectives of those involved in this study seem to highlight the advantages of this practice in preventing school failure, insofar as they mainly counteract or minimise institutional 'barriers'. Finally, we highlight some effects of the practice that promote individual changes in terms of a student's behaviour.

3.1. Institutional 'Barriers to Participation in Learning and School'

Given that this practice is part of a programme promoted by successive governments and developed in schools covering a large part of the country, it is not surprising that the institutional dimension has a significant influence in the descriptions and justifications in the speech of teachers and the technician and, to a lesser extent, in the speech of parents.

From the point of view of the teachers, the technician, and the parents consulted and directly involved in the practice, the processes and factors that most contribute to overcoming barriers seem to be related to institutional barriers, particularly to dimensions of pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment. This practice of student grouping combines the flexibility of syllabuses, methodologies, and assessment grids, as well as adapting activities, groups, and teaching rhythms to the characteristics of the students. According to the teachers and the technician, the purpose of the practice is to overcome school failure by adapting the syllabus to the different groups that may not be being taught at the

same "difficulty level". This aspect of adapting the curriculum and programme content is explained by the teachers:

> There are kids with a lot of difficulties and the subjects are not covered with as much difficulty as in the other groups. It's a lower level of difficulty.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Coordinator of the Portuguese Language]

> C1—Basically, these children . . . the weaker groups . . . what are the advantages of being divided . . . the classes are homogeneous, I'd call them level classes, because they are level classes.
>
> P1—Level classes.
>
> C1—Practically, everyone has the same difficulties. Having two teachers in these groups you do more individualised work with them.
>
> P1—More direct, more personalised.
>
> C1—And they make some progress. And we don't just consider this progress in terms of knowledge. We also consider advances in terms of behaviour, work methods, we think it's very important.
>
> P1—One very important thing is that we can adapt syllabus.
>
> C1—We can.
>
> P1—We adapt the syllabus, but then there's a constraint later. If there's an exam or assessment test . . . there's no correspondence afterwards . . . that's what's been happening. These are the limitations we see.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Mathematics Coordinator and the Portuguese Teacher]

Two perspectives emerge concerning which group has benefited the most from this practice. The Portuguese Teacher and the Portuguese Language Coordinator mentioned that the group with the lowest academic performance benefited the most from this practice:

> I think that, even though the "best group" doesn't accept this practice very well, the ones who benefit most from it are the students who have more difficulties because in this practice and in this group, we have two teachers. In the past, when they were in the mother class, they might not have been able to simply copy from the blackboard, and now in these classes these students manage to get a positive score, or they are able to copy from the blackboard, or they are able to make other progress.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Portuguese Teacher]

> In the new group, the students with more difficulties, participate more because they are among their peers while in the other groups, they are shy.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Portuguese Language Coordinator]

On the other hand, the Mathematics Coordinator pointed out that the group that benefits most from this practice is the higher attaining group:

> In E [high level group] the students benefit, some for the better. There is enrichment work beyond the curriculum, there is broader enrichment. In the other two groups [with more difficulties], we must limit ourselves to teach what they achieve. Although the philosophy of the project, and I want to stress this, is that the curriculum is the same for everyone.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Mathematics Coordinator]

In this vein, Steenbergen-Hu et al. (2016) and Kharel (2021) pointed out that the relationship between student grouping and school performance is only beneficial for students in higher level groups. However, authors such as Archer et al. (2018) indicate that, in lower-level groups, the problems addressed can be overcome through the quality of teaching. Kulik (1992) argued that grouping students makes it possible to adapt the pace

and content according to the level of the group and the needs of students with greater and lesser skills and knowledge.

The perspectives of the teachers and the technician are in line with a study conducted by Linchevski and Kutscher (1998), which reported that teachers have positive attitudes towards these practices. On the other hand, Kulik (1992) pointed out that the effectiveness of student grouping is related to the combination of the extent to which grouping is combined with curricular adjustments in the pedagogical materials used by the teachers.

Salvà-Mut et al. (2014) highlighted that student-centred pedagogy, teacher attitudes and training, and a school environment that favours academic and social engagement with school can contribute to preventing school failure. The focus on articulated and collaborative work between the different actors identified in this practice can be interpreted as an important contribution to the "effectiveness" of the school, encompassing all students and deconstructing a pedagogy of school inequality.

Regarding the practice's objectives and modus operandi, parents state that the practice aims, among other things, to overcome learning difficulties. Parents also mentioned that some of the activities developed are adapted to the specific characteristics of the context under study:

> P2—So the school put these three classes together and it wasn't right at the beginning [of the school year].
>
> P5—Exactly.
>
> P2—But they did some tests and realised that there are students who learn more easily, who are good . . . they can learn more quickly and there are others who have more difficulties. So, they divided these students in three classes . . . with . . .
>
> P5—Consonant . . .
>
> P2—Depending on the student's abilities.
>
> P5—Exactly.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Parent 2 and Parent 5]

> The explanation I've received is that this is also an experiment that the school is carrying out. It's been going on for several years and it seems to have had good results in terms of school success.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Parent 4]

> The weaker students have two teachers who teach them more slowly.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Parent 1]

This pedagogical differentiation is one of the most relevant pedagogical strategies for preventing serious difficulties and empowering and integrating students, contributing to improving their learning and school results and counteracting the effects of social inequalities (Silva and Scherer 2019).

3.2. Situational 'Barriers to Participation in Learning and School'

The findings suggest that this practice is successful in the sense that it points to the existence of communication in the restricted sphere of interaction between schools, parents and families, and communities (situational dimension). The perspectives of the teachers and the technician reveal that the work of communicating, translating, and negotiating the meanings of the practice is carried out mainly in the initial phase of presenting the practice to the families at the beginning of the school year. The practice has an interventional and directive character, being a measure more centred on the student and the early detection of the necessary support for motivation and learning. Its aim is to promote positive discrimination through the treatment of students' differences by teachers, understood as a way of reducing inequalities (Rodrigues et al. 2020). From the standpoint of teachers and technicians, it is very important to have processes of communication, translation,

negotiation, and interaction between schools, parents, and families, especially with the parents and students in the highest levels groups who question the value of the practice.

> At the beginning of the school year, we explain to the parents, the school board and the directors that we place the children in the same class as the others, a "mother" class, and then, at a certain point, we split them into groups. Three classes form three other classes. Most of the parents agree with the way the practice operates, but sometimes the parents of the students in the higher groups are less keen on the practice because they believe that their children will be penalised. However, we explained how it works and the objectives of the practice and they ended up understanding its purpose.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Mathematics Coordinator]

The Portuguese Teacher stated that the parents of the children in the lowest-achieving groups accept the practice very well:

> When it's explained to them that their children will have more individualised closer support that will better meet their needs, they don't question anything else. If it helps them [the students with the lowest results] parents welcome this practice.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Portuguese Teacher]

However, in the opinion of most of the parents, the dynamics of the practice are beneficial for the students in all three groups:

> P4—According to what they say, the student who is particularly good learns straight away and in a class with some very bad students, what happens, that student who is distracted, is chattering, the teacher tries to explain the subject to the slowest one. So, the students split up into groups all benefit from practice.
>
> P2—I also agree . . .
>
> P1—It's been working.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Parent 1 (P1), Parent 2 and Parent 4]

Some authors, including Mata et al. (2022), Sheridan et al. (2019), and Smith and Sheridan (2019) emphasise that the relationship established between school and family brings benefits for children's development and academic achievement, as well as for parents and school institutions.

3.3. Dispositional 'Barriers to Participation in Learning and School'

All those involved in this study were unanimous in pointing out the importance of creating stable intervention teams based on strong and continuous relationships (dispositional dimension) between the students and the teachers and technicians directly involved in the practice:

> Sometimes they are almost our children.
>
> [Excerpt from the FG—Mathematics Coordinator]

> The students here are more supported, they are accompanied in an affectionate and very close way.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Socio-cultural Animator]

In relation to the aspects that they most value in the practice, parents agreed on the closeness between students and teachers, as well as the support and comprehension shown by the teachers:

> P2—My son has some learning difficulties in Portuguese. He does, but it's nothing special, it's just that he's in the weakest group. The thing about Portuguese [language] is that he has two teachers, and I think that's a good thing, because he says that the teacher checks his notebook and sees when he's doing well . . . and that's good for them because it's they're taught more closely.

> P4—More personalised.
>
> P2—It's that way. I think so.
>
> P4—I also ask my son if he likes it and he says yes, he likes it. He doesn't have any problems.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Parent 2 and Parent 4]

> My son often tells me that the teacher has been looking at his notebook and then tells him that he did very well at the board. There's positive reinforcement . . . and I think it's teaching more closely, and this has proved to be the case.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Parent 3]

Ferreira and Andrade (2017) emphasised the importance of the affective dimension in the construction of knowledge. The teacher–student relationship is mentioned in some studies as a factor that seems to be important for school success, stressing that this pedagogy is necessary for building an environment favourable to the construction of knowledge (Rodrigues et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, the teachers and the technician indicated some negative impacts on the quality of teaching/learning. These actors questioned the discrepancy between "internal" success and "external" success. "Internal" success results from the assessment of students within the school, while "external" success is measured by an external assessment through the results of national exams. On the one hand, internal school success is achieved through institutional measures based on student regrouping, curricular flexibilisation (including timetables), increased resources, and different assessment measures (Ekstrom 1972; Perrenoud 1995; Bernstein 1996; Roosmaa and Saar 2017), while, on the other hand, external success is attained through an external assessment that does not take this kind of specific work into consideration (Abrantes et al. 2011). The success reached by the students in the lowest-achieving group seems to be the result of pedagogical and objective differentiation. However, the differentiation of objectives is not very clear; in the discourses of teachers and the technician, some divergences have emerged:

> C1—Internally, they're good, they get good grades, they're one of our best classes, in both groups we teach the same content. The content is taught in the same way with different strategies. Of course, I'm not going to demand that children achieve the content or know everything . . . but that they learn things that will allow them to progress . . . slowly in their lives. That's what they achieve internally . . . both in terms of knowledge and personal (know-how). But then, in the external assessment, the socio-affective aspect doesn't matter at all, only the cognitive aspect matters. As the socio-affective component doesn't count, the results aren't very good in these two groups. They're very poor . . .
>
> P1—For me the main barrier is precisely there . . . we work hard, they get good results, they succeed, but then you get to the benchmarking test, and they don't get any results.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Mathematics Coordinator and the Portuguese Teacher]

These negative impacts are pointed out in studies on student grouping practices, as argued by Kharel (2021) and Archer et al. (2018). In this sense, Antunes (2019) also questioned some measures and curricular policies aimed at overcoming school failure and dropout in terms of the quantity and quality of learning provided to the students, which can eventually create a "sweet form of exclusion" (Sá and Veloso 2018).

3.4. Effects of the Practice of Student Grouping

In this study, certain aspects related to individual changes are mentioned as factors to overcome 'barriers to access and participation' frequently highlighted by most of the participants involved, relating them to academic performance, integration, cooperation, and socialisation. Both coordinators interviewed recognise that the practice promotes changes on an individual level regarding school:

> Above all, this practice allows them to overcome barriers that will improve the expectations of young people's academic performance (. . .) while there are significant improvements in other areas, such as integration, cooperation, and socialisation, knowing how to be and intervene appropriately in classes.
>
> [Excerpt from FG—Portuguese Language Coordinator]

> They feel happy at school. The two groups with the greatest difficulties, given that the other group remain the same, they fit in and know how to co-operate, they learn to work as a group, they exchange opinions and at a certain point they manage to achieve their educational goals.
>
> [Excerpt from the FG—Mathematics Coordinator]

The perspectives of teachers, the technician, and parents highlight some individual changes in terms of students' behaviour related to the construction of psychological competences, self-control, and interaction articulated with the students' craft (Perrenoud 1995), as well as with the rules of realization (Bernstein 1996).

These skills and behaviours are often aligned with the representations of the "ideal student" held by some teachers (Albuquerque et al. 2022), which can be considered an important factor in students' success or failure at school. Teachers and the technician emphasise that this practice supports the expectation of providing students with the foundations to continue their studies, providing these students with learning skills that are a prerequisite for the student's craft (learning and academic performance: attention in class, completing tasks, homework) (Perrenoud 1995; Roosmaa and Saar 2017; Afonso and Palhares 2019).

4. Conclusions

The data collected and analysed in this study indicate that the practice of student grouping addresses 'barriers to learning and education' that are essentially linked to institutional, dispositional, and situational dimensions (Ekstrom 1972; Antunes and Lúcio 2019; Antunes 2019). The aim of the practice is to promote measures of positive discrimination through the treatment of students' diversity by teachers, seen as a way to reduce inequalities (Rodrigues et al. 2020).

The perspectives of the teachers, technician, and parents who participated in this study indicate that the main processes that contribute to overcoming these barriers, in this practice, are related to dimensions of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment (institutional barriers), communication and interaction between schools, parents/families and communities (situational barriers), and stability of intervention teams with strong and continuous relationships (dispositional barriers), which promote some changes among students, particularly at an individual level.

Regarding the institutional dimension, from the perspective of the educational agents consulted, the practice encourages teachers and technicians to work towards more individualised teaching, which allows them to adapt the pace and curriculum content to the students' needs (Linchevski and Kutscher 1998), thus improving school results, which seems to be in line with the opinions of Kulik (1992). It is stressed that student-centred pedagogy, the teachers' collaborative work, and the school environment promote academic and social engagement with the school and can, therefore, contribute to the prevention of school failure and dropout (Salvà-Mut et al. 2014).

From the point of view of the educational agents involved, the processes of communication, translation, negotiation, and interaction between schools, parents, and families (situational dimension) and the relationship established between school and family can provide positive outcomes for the development and academic performance of children and young people (Mata et al. 2022; Sheridan et al. 2019).

In relation to the importance of establishing stable intervention teams, based on strong and continuous relationships (dispositional dimension) between the students and the teachers and technicians involved in the practice, all the participants in this study strongly

concur on highlighting the importance of the affective dimension in the construction of knowledge and school success (Ferreira and Andrade 2017; Rodrigues et al. 2020).

However, in the practice of student grouping under study, in the lower-achievement group, there is some evidence, supported by document analysis of data, that relativises the improvement in students' normative success (Archer et al. 2018; Kharel 2021), which is reflected in the evaluation of the practice in terms of external success (Abrantes et al. 2011). One of the emerging questions we want to further explore concerns the quality of success and whether this "normative success" reflects the acquisition of skills, attitudes, and "powerful knowledge" developed to provide "a basis for making judgements (...) that context-independent knowledge which is, at least potentially, acquired at school" (Young 2007, p. 1296), corresponding to the level of education these students attend. Given the presence of many children and young people from culturally and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, and in order to deepen our understanding of this practice, we intend to analyse if the practice might create a "sweet form of exclusion" (Antunes and Sá 2015) as a result of the decrease in requirements in terms of academic results, in favour of a focus on social results (Sá and Veloso 2018).

Future research will focus on the perspectives of the students directly involved in the socio-educational practice of student grouping, to understand the main contributions of this practice to overcoming school failure, dropout, and early school leaving.

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Appendix A

1. **Institutional dimensions**—Institutional dimensions of the practice under study related to learning and school success;
    - **1.1 Pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment**—Description of the practice, with reference to the institutional initiative. Organisation of time, space, groups (size, for example), activities (more time, fewer different activities per day), content and study cycles (contextualisation of the curriculum), work teams, rhythm, general rules, rules for performance;
    - **1.2 Student participation**—Student participation with reference to the initiative of children and young people. Spaces, times, activities, and procedures. Delib-

erative, educational, and/or evaluative participation. Student participation in decisions regarding content, themes, activities, performance, and rules;

1.3 **The quality of learning**—Pedagogical quality and scientific quality of learning;

1.4 **Positive and negative expectations**—Regarding student performance, student interests/motivation, and the position/conduct of families;

1.5 **Inter-institutional support and work**—Collaboration between institutions, with the aim of favouring school success;

2. **Dispositional dimensions**—Dimensions relating to the disposition/conditions for learning (management of educational objectives; stimulation, construction of academic aspirations, and expectations; attitude towards intellectual work; feeling of belonging, strangeness);

2.1 **Stability of intervention teams**—Strong and continuous relationships. Temporal dimension;

2.2 **Sustaining learning**—Student role learning that is a prerequisite for the student role (behavioural norms: language, posture, internalised self-control, impersonal, self-mastery);

2.3 **Sustaining learning: student role**—Improving school grades;

2.4 **Sustaining learning that is a prerequisite for professional life**—Learning geared towards acquiring competences that can help people integrate into the labour market and/or geared towards promoting lifelong learning (e.g., professional/vocational training; curricular integration of academic and professional components; job search tools and procedures; etc.);

3. **Situational dimensions**—Specific life situations, including own, family, and social responsibilities or expectations associated with age, gender, or stage in the life cycle;

3.1 **Communication, translation, and negotiation and interaction between schools, parents/families, and communities**—Role of teachers, technicians, and others in communication, translation, and negotiation with the others in the development of practice. Times, spaces, and procedures;

3.2 **Reference figures' influence (peer group, school/leisure context, parents)—**In the school and personal lives of children and young people who are part of the different practices and who condition decision-making, behavioural, and emotional and motivational attitudes of children and young people towards school and academic and professional aspirations;

4. **Transformation effects**—Social/institutional, dispositional, situational, collective, individual effects, promoted by the practice under study, that most contribute to creating conditions for overcoming barriers (institutional, situational, and dispositional) to participation and learning.

Notes

[1] This socio-educational practice was previously identified as successful in promoting school success through an interview with the local coordinator of the project and document analysis in the first phase of the research project.

[2] The Portuguese education system is structured in 1st cycle (4 years), 2nd cycle (2 years), 3rd cycle (3 years), and secondary education (3 years). Compulsory education ends with the completion of 12 years of schooling, between the ages of 6 and 18.

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