PERSPECTIVES OF PORTUGUESE MUNICIPAL EDUCATION OFFICERS ON SCHOOL DISENGAGEMENT

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Resumo: This paper is part of a research project that aims to understand the perspectives of different actors about school disengagement, in different municipalities, in the context of the decentralization of education in Portugal. This paper examines, particularly, how municipal education officers see the prevalence of school underachievement and dropout; and its ascribed specific factors. The findings suggest that dropout is not a major concern for municipal education officers, since it is considered camouflaged or just residual. School underachievement is understood as not high or as clearly decreasing. It is identified as a problem demanding for solutions. Regarding the factors related to school disengagement, family/social contexts are the most stressed, followed by systemic educational factors. The results also suggest that municipal education officers are more liable to focus positively on school achievement and on what municipalities can do.

Keywords: school achievement, underachievement and dropout, school disengagement, local authorities, municipalities, decentralisation

PERSPETIVAS DE TÉCNICOS MUNICIPAIS DE EDUCAÇÃO SOBRE A DESAFETAÇÃO ESCOLAR

Abstract: Este artigo integra-se num projeto que visa compreender as perspetivas de diferentes atores sobre desafetação escolar, em diferentes municípios, no contexto da descentralização da educação em Portugal. Este artigo está centrado, nomeadamente, em perceber como os técnicos superio-

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res de educação dos municípios perspetivam a prevalência do insucesso e do abandono escolares e com que fatores os relacionam. Os resultados sugerem que o abandono escolar não é uma preocupação para os técnicos, uma vez que o consideram residual ou apenas confundido com outro fenómeno. Quanto ao insucesso escolar, tanto é percebido como não sendo significativo ou que tem vindo a diminuir como se reconhece como um problema que é preciso enfrentar. Os resultados sugerem ainda que os técnicos tendem a focar-se prioritariamente na promoção do sucesso escolar, mais concretamente, naquilo que os municípios podem fazer do que em focar-se no lado negativo da problemática da desconexão com a escola.

Palavras-chave: sucesso, insucesso e abandono escolares, desafetação escolar, municípios, descentralização da educação

PERSPECTIVES DES TECHNICIENS MUNICIPAUX D'ÉDUCATION SUR LE DÉCROCHAGE SCOLAIRE

Resumé: Dans le cadre d'un projet de recherche qui vise à comprendre les points de vue des différents acteurs sur la déconnexion de l'école, dans des différentes municipalités, dans le cadre de la décentralisation de l'éducation au Portugal, cette étude s'appuie sur des entretiens réalisés auprès d'autorités locales (échevins et techniciens supérieurs de l'éducation), enseignants, parents et directeurs scolaires, en se focalisant aussi sur leurs perceptions sur la mise en réseau au niveau local. Cet article se centre notamment sur la façon dont les techniciens municipaux de l'éducation perçoivent la prévalence de l'échec et du décrochage scolaire et les facteurs auxquels ceci est lié. Les résultats suggèrent que le décrochage n'est pas une préoccupation pour les techniciens, car ils considèrent qu'il est résiduel ou simplement confondu avec un autre phénomène. Quant à l'échec scolaire, est perçu, soit comme n'étant pas significatif, ou en décroissement, soit comme un problème qu'on doit affronter. Les résultats montrent notamment que les techniciens ont tendance à se concentrer principalement sur la promotion de la réussite scolaire, plus précisément, en ce qu'ils/les mairies peuvent faire (par exemple, soutien matériel et social), que de se concentrer sur le côté négatif du problème de la déconnexion avec l'école.

Mots-clés: réussite, échec et décrochage scolaire, décrochage scolaire précoce, autorités locales, municipalités, décentralisation de l'éducation

1. Introduction

This article is about the perspectives of Portuguese municipal education officers' (henceforth referred to as MEOs) on school underachievement and dropout. It assumes that understanding their viewpoints about these topics on school disengagement will contribute to the appreciation of the complex regulations of education at local level. The article is integrated in

a national research project[1], aimed at contributing to the promotion of social justice, citizenship and social rights (Bernstein, 1996; Young, 2000). It examines the involvement of municipalities in promoting school achievement, in the context of decentralisation policies in Portugal. In particular, the project focuses on the perspectives of local education authorities (LEAs) about school underachievement and dropout and about cooperation/networking education.[2]

In the second half of the XX century, the problem of school underachievement and dropout gained relevance and became the center of numerous studies, strategies, recommendations, programs and reforms, in Europe and in other regions. Particularly since the 1970s, school systems were subject to the impacts of the economic crisis. Simultaneously, the sociology of education was revealing that school could replicate social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1990, 1977; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1997; Canário, 2004; Stoer, 2008; European Commission [EC], 2010; Council of the European Union [CEU], 2011).

When comparing the figures related to early school leaving in Europe and Portugal, as important indicators of the development of education, we can see that they have been decreasing in both but, in the latter, the rate is clearly higher than in the twenty seven European Union countries (EU27). In Portugal, in 1992, the rate of early leavers from education and training (ESLers) was 50%. In 2000 it was 43,6%, descending to a rate of 20,8%, in 2012[3]. Retention rates in basic and secondary schooling, in 2010-2011were as follows: 1st CEB, Primary School) (ISCED1) – 3,3%; 2º CEB (ISCED2, 1st stage) – 7,4%; 3º CEB (ISCED2, 2nd stage) – 13,13%; Upper Secondary School (ISCED3) – 20,8%.

Reducing early school leaving to less than 10% by 2020 is one the EU targets in order to prevent poverty, unemployment and social exclusion (EC, 2010). Meanwhile, it became clear that Early School Leaving (ESL) is the result of «multi-dimensional, long term and crossing over macro, meso and micro risk factors» processes of disengagement from school» (Ferguson et al., 2005: 24).

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[1] The financed project «Networking in Education» (*Trabalhar em Rede na Educação*) is focused on the analysis of the involvement of local authorities in the promotion of school achievement. More concretely, it is centred on the analysis of the perspectives of local authorities in the confrontation with school dropout and namely in the partnerships and networks in which they are involved in order to pursue those endeavours. The project developed in 25 municipalities, in 13 of the 18 districts in Portugal: Porto, Braga, Viana do Castelo, Coimbra, Aveiro, Lisboa, Beja, Évora, Faro, Setúbal, Vila Real, Bragança and Viseu. The study is concerned mainly with compulsory schooling. In 2009, compulsory schooling laws changed, from requiring ISCED 2 (lower secondary education) to ISCED 3 (upper secondary education). However, this change only started to be applied in 2012. When the interviews were conducted, compulsory schooling in Portugal was still at ISCED 2.

[2] The authors would like to thank to all the interviewees and all the municipalities that so kindly have agreed to participate in this research. Any errors of interpretation remain our own. They wish also to thank Dr. Eunice Macedo for reviewing the English version.

[3] PORDATA – Base de dados Portugal Contemporâneo [Data base on contemporary Portugal], 2013; Instituto Nacional de Estatística [INE, the Portuguese National Statistics Agency], 2013.

Differently from other European countries, actions to tackle directly school disengagement in Portugal started late in the twentieth century, in late 1980s (Benavente, 1990). Since then, and combined with the extension of compulsory schooling, various programs have been announced and applied, aiming at avoiding school disengagement and directly reducing school underachievement. This is the case of the Interministerial Programa de Promoção do Sucesso Escolar (PIPSE, Interministerial Programme for Promoting School Success), of Programa Educação Para Todos (PEPT, Education for All Programme) and of the Territórios de Intervenção Prioritária (TEIP (Programme for Priority Intervention Areas) (Ferreira & Teixeira, 2010), followed by several strategies centered in schools or in other stances.

New modes of regulation of public affairs in «territorial» bases have be one of the responses to the problem. Decentralising education has been a trend. Namely after de 1990s, the tendency to change educational policies gave way to new modes of regulating public action in education. This became visible in different transnational, national, local, multi and meta regulation (Barroso, 2004). The educational field has been object of both theoretical and legal debates. The latter aiming to regulate by law the transference of powers between central and local government (e.g. Law No. 159/1999; Decree-law No. 144/2008). Much more than before, education is the responsibility of different stakeholders. Governance, in addition to governing, became apparent in new ways of regulating public affairs, increasingly dependent on the complex relationships among different public and private entities (Lima, 2007), which have the assignment to improve public administration, promoting school success as well.

The main actors in the new governance in education develop their work in schools (teachers and principals) and in the municipalities (councillors and officers)[4], involving also other stakeholders outside these organisations. All these actors are expected to articulate strategies, either through networks or by means of some kind of cooperation. If teachers and principals have always been main actors in education, the new municipal actors comprise what could be called local education authorities (LEAs), with specific powers in education. Hence, micro-local regulations' are required through complex strategies which occur in «confrontations, interactions, negotiations, compromises» among individual «logics, interests and rationalities»

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[4] Municipality (*município, concelho*) is a Portuguese territorial unit. Each municipality is governed by a Town Hall (*câmara municipal*). The Town Hall has political actors and executive actors. Political actors, councilpersons (*vereadores*), are elected by the local community for a period of four years and are responsible for political decisions in specific areas, such as education. Municipal councilperson for education (*vereador da educação*) are in charge of education at political level. Executive actors (*técnicos*) belong to the municipality staff, and directly put into practice municipal policies. Municipal education officers (MEOs, *técnicos municipais da educação*) are the personnel whose specific work is highly related to educational affairs in the municipality. They generally integrate all the actions related to education, following the political guidelines of councilperson.

(Barroso, 2004: 6). In this context, it is central to understand how the main actors in education at local level perceive key aspects such as school disengagement. This is likely to contribute to further understanding the regulations in education.

This paper addresses some conceptual considerations about the semantic area of school disengagement, as well as a brief description about municipal education officers (MEOs) tasks and roles. Some notes on methodology are added, followed by the presentation of the findings about MEOs perspectives around the targeted concepts and about factors they relate them with. Some conclusions are drawn and interpreted in the light of the expressed considerations.

2. Conceptual considerations

Given the scope of this paper, there is need for a brief review of concepts. Defining the main notions of the semantic area of school underachievement and dropout is complex, not only because these concepts are often closely related to specific educational policies and political changes in each country, but also because measurement criteria procedures vary from country to country.

These concepts are: «school dropout», «early school leaving» (ESL), «early leavers from education and training» (ESLers) and «not in education, employment and training» (NEET). They are related with the conceptual evolution of the basic phenomenon of school dropout, one of the main concerns of the EU, the USA and other regions. Although these terms are not synonymous, they are sometimes used as such, as one can read in a report for the European Commission: «in the USA, early school leavers, «dropouts», are those who have not graduated from High School» (Dale, 2010: 13).

Currently, school dropout holds a more restricted sense when compared with ESL:

While the term «early school leaving» includes all forms of leaving education and training before completing upper secondary education or equivalent in vocational education and training, the term «school dropout» is used with a much more restricted meaning: it refers to discontinuing an ongoing course in general or vocational education and training. (EC, 2010: 5)

That is, a person can dropout from one course and, nonetheless, conclude another, in the same period or in a later time. This means that school dropout does not always mean «early school leaving», because the young person may later return to some kind of education. According to Lamb, Markussen, Teese, Polesel, and Sandberg (2011), the term school dropout is mainly used in the USA and Canada to refer to young people who leave school without

concluding any high school diploma, and is «rarely used by statistical agencies, education authorities and research centres» (p. 4).

These terms have the counterpart 'school completion', which is used in some contexts as graduation and in others as retention to the final year or obtaining an upper secondary certificate or equivalent. Also, in some education systems, such as the English and the Scottish, this concept is not found (Lamb et al., 2011). Although there is no consensus on the concept, we agree with these authors about the need to measure education results based on completion of a certain degree.

In face of this complexity, particular attention needs to be paid to the concept definitions chosen by international and national statistical agencies, such as Statistical Office of the European Communities (EUROSTAT) and INE (National Statistics).

- *School dropout* (*abandono escolar*) refers to the abandonment of the education system before completing compulsory schooling within the legal age limits (INE, 2013) – this term evolved to ESL and NEET, although it is widely used as 'synonym' of its evolutionary terms.
- *Early school leavers* (ESL) is used to refer to those in the age group 18-24 who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, who are no longer in education or training (CEU, 2011).
- *Young people – not in employment education and training* (NEET) refers the population of a given age group who meet the following two conditions – (a) they are not employed (i.e. unemployed or inactive according to the International Labour Organization definition) and (b) they have not received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey (EUROSTAT, 2013).
- *School Disengagement* is usually described as a process, a result of several factors and is associated with NEET and ESL (Ferguson et al., 2005). *Youth disengagement* is the preferred expression for the UK government to define NEET (Brader & McGinty, 2005).

Concerning school achievement and underachievement, there is extensive discussion about the topic, namely about the criteria to define school achievement/underachievement. In general, school underachievement can be used for schools that do not attain most of their goals: developing pupils personality, values and behaviours in order to promote socialisation, knowledge and acquisition of various techniques. School achievement is often referred as school success, educational success or school engagement. Although the concept school underachievement does not have the same meaning in all countries (Mendonça, 2006), the most restricted, and certainly the most prevalent meaning addresses instructional goals, often omit-

ting stimulation and socialisation goals as a result (Fernandes, 1991). Consequently, the most frequent indicator of school underachievement is the percentage of pupils who do not move on to the next school year. ESL/school dropout is, very often, a repercussion of «school disengagement». When a pupil leaves school, this is already the result of an 'announced' process observed in one or several years of school underachievement or, at least, of school disaffection (Dale, 2010; Ferguson et al., 2005), and the result of complex youth pathways (Ferguson et al., 2005). According to Brader and McGinty (2005: 5), disengagement is used by practitioners, politicians and researchers to describe «young people who do not have a stable learning relationship with a significant adult or institution», but the authors also remind the difficulty in clarifying the concept. Anyway, school disengagement appears as an «umbrella concept» that, with more or less assertiveness, covers most of the complexity of concepts addressed above.

Whatever the definitions, indicators or explanations, there is a wide consensus about the negative repercussions of school underachievement and disengagement and about the need to decrease in order to achieve European central objectives, as mentioned above.

3. Municipal education officers: the middle tier of local education authorities

Understanding municipal education officers' (MEOs) perceptions about the concepts above is central to interpret in further research the ways in which they act and interact with other entities, their purposes leading to an increased understanding of the whole process of education regulation at local level.

MEOs are the staff chosen by local political authorities to be responsible for educational affairs in the municipalities. Some of them have academic or professional backgrounds related to education or social affairs (in fact, this is the case of the majority of the interviewed for this project). They are Local Education Authorities (LEAs) who are supposed to work closely with the municipal councillors for education, the schools and other stakeholders that intervene in education at local level. MEOs have the task of placing political guidelines into practice and, simultaneously, coordinate or participate in various strategies, either centered in the municipalities, in the schools or in other entities. LEAs are partners with schools and other organisations (generally local, but sometimes regional or national) and have a say in most of the negotiations and decisions to tackle local educational issues. MEOs are often the chosen spokespersons, representing the municipality in external organisations, such as School Cluster Boards[5]. They

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[5] School Cluster Boards (*Conselhos Gerais de Agrupamentos de Escolas*) – «strategic directive board that has the responsibility to define the guidelines for the School Cluster, ensuring educative community representation and participation»

develop their work amongst various entities and, whatever the kind of cooperation among the actors involved in education in each municipality, be it a complex network or just a brief cooperation, MEOs generally do have a visible role in interpreting and negotiating or in decision making.

In the Portuguese educational system, we can say that, along with councillors for education, MEOs compose the group of local education authorities (LEAs). LEAs' perspectives and roles have been studied in Europe (e.g. Agyemang, 2009; Payne, 2010; Chapman & Hadfield, 2010; Lee, Louis, & Anderson, 2012), but the ones of MEOs are still in need of more studies. Particularly, Payne (2010) interviewed LEAs and other stakeholders in order to perceive their roles and partnerships in the governance of education at local level. It should be reminded that, due to the differences in education systems, in some countries (e.g. in the UK), LEA is not an exact equivalent to MEO, in Portugal. Nonetheless, we can say that, just like LEAs in countries like UK, in the Portuguese educational system, MEOs compose the 'middle tier' in education affairs, since they respond to central as well as to local instances. Hence they are pressed to participate in the creation of «local» responses (Chapman & Hadfield, 2010). Data show that MEOs view the role of municipalities as a link and pillar of social dynamics, involving local government, schools and other entities (Costa et al., 2012). MEOs are central pieces in the processes of regulation of education and seem to «bridge» between central and local political guidelines and action. They integrate and possibly tie together several stakeholders' options and strategies. Therefore it is relevant to understand their views about crucial issues in education.

4. Methodological notes

The project on the basis of this article was developed in 13 districts across Portugal, in an intentional sample of 25 municipalities, under criteria such as Upper Secondary School dropout rates, geographical location and population density, in a total of 111 interviews to different stakeholders. This paper relates only to one kind of stakeholders, 21 MEOs, who were interviewed in 2011-2012. Semi-structured interviews were carried out, transcribed and analyzed by means of content analysis with NVivo software. The interviews are referred according to coding criteria of region and type of interviewee. Research questions that guided the interviews covered the following topics: i) diagnosis of general municipal problems and

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(Decree-law No. 75/2008, p. 2345). School Cluster Boards are composed by teachers, education auxiliary staff, parent's associations and community representatives (often specific entities, such as universities and commercial, industrial or cultural associations). Clustering different schools, integrating administrative and pedagogical aspects at different school levels, from pre-school to upper secondary school has been a recent trend in educational policies in Portugal.

specific educational problems; ii) school underachievement and dropout; iii) educational poli-
cies; iv) local governance of education at the level; v) networking in education; and vi) the
balance and perspectives for the future, concerning the modes of regulation of education.
Inspired by the most common theories to explain school underachievement and dropout, a
grid of analysis was used generating the results below.

5. Municipal education officers' perspectives on school underachievement and dropout

As previously mentioned, this paper addresses municipal education officers' (MEOs) per-
spectives about key issues in education, namely school underachievement and dropout. The
main results are as follows.

5.1. School dropout: no matter for concern and solved through vocational courses

In general, municipal education officers share similar views on school dropout, as they
seem unanimous in stating that there is no school dropout or that, when it exists it is residual.
Clearly, for this group of new actors in educational affairs, the concept of school dropout is
difficult to define, to measure and to identify, and it can often be misconstructed, since they
argue that not always the available data is coincident or reliable. Sometimes, what «we» are
dealing with is not exactly dropout, but rather something else, namely procedural confusions
or processes of mobility, as well as seasonal work that affects particularly immigrants and cer-
tain ethnic groups. As explained by a MEO from an urban coastal municipality,

> there are many Brazilian citizens that go away and cancel their enrolment (…) around that time of the year
> (…), there are many such cases which, from a statistical viewpoint and regarding data treatment, are later clas-
> sified as dropouts but which are not exactly dropouts. (LX-AT8)

Considering the two meanings of 'school dropout' referred above, the more restricted one
seems to be prevalent, namely the «discontinuing an ongoing course in general or vocational
education and training» (EC, 2010). The notions of ESL, NEET and ESLers were not raised by
MEOs. This can be explained due to the fact that the interviews were more directed towards
the present-day and not so much towards longitudinal standpoints. Anyhow, MEOs tend to
mention significant level of school dropout mostly in the transition from the 9th year into
upper secondary school.

also some school dropout in the third cycle, at the end of the third cycle and also at the end of secondary cycle. (P-AT2)

[school dropout] is not high, it has been decreasing, it is not really high, and when it occurs, it occurs in the secondary level, namely in the transition to the secondary level, I think this happens throughout the country. (LX-AT2)

The devaluation of school dropout can be extracted from this statement. This may be interpreted having in mind that dropout frequently is preceded by school disengagement, so when a pupil leaves school, it is not ever possible to be sure if he or she will come back later or will ever finish secondary schooling or a vocational course before the age of 24.

One of the interviewees' arguments is that dropout rates have been successfully reduced in recent years through the use of alternative solutions to regular curricula, such as the PIEF, CEF and EFA[6]. By means of these courses, potential «leavers» are kept in education or training as they are pushed to alternative solutions:

Nowadays, we don't have a lot of school dropout, it is not significant. Those pupils who left, who abandoned school, have returned to school. They attend PIEF courses and so, we don´t have dropout. (VR-AT2)

School dropout is not noticeable here, and we have solutions for those cases, in this municipality schools address that problem and we offer EFA courses and other courses for pupils who could be at risk of dropping out. (LX-AT7)

Also, some respondents assert that school dropout affects more particular segments of the population than others. Roma community is referred as a segment with high level of school dropout, especially among girls (see Casa-Nova, 2006, for details).

To sum up, for MEOs, school dropout is not a problem, at least (formerly) in compulsory school, as the educational system offers schooling alternatives to avoid dropout (courses that integrate education and vocational/professional training). However there is some concern about dropout in the transition to secondary education.

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[6] These programs/courses include a vocational/professional component and are meant to respond to school dropout and underachievement:
PIEF – Integrated Education and Training Program (*Programa Integrado de Educação e Formação*);
CEF – Education and Training Course (*Curso de Educação e Formação*);
EFA – Adult Education and Vocational Training Courses (*Cursos de Educação e Formação para Adultos*) – they aim to develop adults' academic and professional qualifications, by integrating education and vocational training in order to enhance employability and certification of life-long acquired competencies.

5.2. School underachievement: from «no more a problem» to a more skeptical stance

The most prevalent concepts of school underachievement in the interviews denote that references are based on school education instructional goals (Fernandes, 1991). These actors expressed two different positions about the prevalence and consequent concerns about school underachievement:

a) *The level of school underachievement is not high/has been decreasing* and, therefore, there is not a problem anymore «School underachievement, the school itself, has been improving a lot in the national ranking. (…) I think that this is not the problem» (VR-AT2).

b) *The level of school underachievement is average or high*. That is, similarly to dropout, school underachievement is not always easy to measure, and it is a matter of concern, in stronger or weaker stances. It affects all school levels, particularly between years 7 to 9 of compulsory education[7] and in the transition to secondary school (ISCEDC3); sometimes, it affects more particularly certain school subjects: «School Clusters have, in fact, been pointing out that the level of underachievement has increased, especially in certain school subjects» (LX-AT3).

MEOs who share the second point of view consider that the reported positive tendencies on the figures about school underachievement are the result of a *camouflage*. They state that, in spite of the positive figures, underachievement is undoubtedly high but it is being disguised by strategies settled either from the Ministry of Education or by schools. Some interviewees argued that achievement must be «effective» and not just «a piece of paper» (meaning a «certified achievement») and that the government should not mask the figures:

> At the end of the school year, every student is «successful», but then, in the second cycle of basic education we are faced with the old problem, every teacher complains that pupils cannot read or write, that they do not know anything at all. (P-AT10)

This category of opinions, which we may qualify as «sceptical», occurs more often in the more populated coastal municipalities, although it can also be found in the poorer inland regions.

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[7] ISCED2, 2nd stage, by the time the interviews were carried out.

The two apparently contradictory perspectives about the prevalence, and consequent concern about underachievement, need to be framed within the actors institutional standpoint. Such perspectives can be explained by different reasons: on the one hand, the notion that before (not too long ago) underachievement rates were, in fact, higher; on the other hand, the argument that, especially at elementary school, school achievement also owes to municipalities' initiatives and commitment to education. Indeed, most of MEOs do acknowledge that school achievement has been increasing in elementary school (which has fallen into the scope of municipalities' responsibilities, together with pre-school, according to the recent restructuring of education in the vein of decentralization):

> At the elementary school level, achievement is particularly significant. (P-AT2)

> I think the municipality's main contribution for school achievement is, in fact, at the elementary school and kindergarten level, as it is true that it is best to push development at a younger age. (VR-AT7)

In fact, it seems that municipal education officers (MEOs) prefer the positive standpoint rather than a negative one, since they tend to address the issues from the angle of promoting school achievement than from challenging school underachievement and dropout.

6. The search for «causes»

In order to help understanding, in further research, the types of regulations and networks municipalities are engaged in, it is necessary to find out the factors mentioned by MEOs as related to school underachievement and dropout. The answers obtained unveil the «causes» pointed out by these LEAs.

6.1. Blaming the pupils: the exception

Blaming pupils for their school failure is a notion that has been used to account for school underachievement for some decades (Benavente, 1990; Fernandes, 1991). It seems to be definitely out-of-date for MEOs. Still, some respondents added certain responsibility for underachievement to pupils' psychological factors:

> The third cycle of basic education is dramatic. The seventh year… on the brink of going from the second into the third cycle is tough! There are psychological factors underlying this issue which, as I see it, although I am no expert, make this stage a frightening thing. (P-AT10)

In this case, pupils' features, namely those related to adolescence and emotional instability can be seen as 'frightening'. However, this case is the exception and not the mainstream in MEOs' answers and the «pupil dimension» was only mentioned in addition to other.

6.2. The centrality of family and its contexts

In MEOs' perspectives, it is in the realm of «family and its contexts» that lies the main factor for school underachievement and dropout. Systematically, consistently and most emphatically, in the more or less populated, poorer or richer, inland and coastal municipalities, MEOs mentioned the family and family background as closely related to underachievement.

The «family dimension» is present in two subcategories:

a) *«Dysfunctional» families*, family environments like single parents, split parents, or pupils living with grandparents:

> I think that children from single-parent families or experiencing some sort of conflict within the family are obviously more vulnerable. They are usually more prone to be aggressive, show less interest for things in general and particularly for everything that has to do with classroom activities. (…) The main problem is the third cycle because it is here that pupils need more attention, and living their lives without family, without a father or mother, very often does not stimulate their attention for school and learning. (VR-T7)

b) *Economically and culturally underprivileged families*, characterised by low income as well as little or no regard for school education, and unable to motivate and help pupils with school tasks. This is the most prevalent and most emphasized category:

> From the beginning, when access to education must be equal for all, we do not consider huge differences, unless it is concerning an individual aspect related to families; the difference can be seen in each family situation that can lead to underachievement, namely when there are no conditions to study properly, when parents do not give support, lack of motivation. (VR-AT2)

These are just some of the examples that indicate that, from MEOs point of view, the family dimension and its contexts is highly linked with school underachievement, in the first place, and more significantly than any other factors.

6.3. Questioning the education system: demanding changes within school

The educational system is another dimension that is frequently mentioned by MEOs as related to school underachievement. The extension of the influence of cultural reproduction theories (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) is not easily quantifiable in these findings, but MEOs do mention educational system issues that need particular attention such as: (i) the need to rapidly conclude school restructuring and reorganisation; (ii) better articulation between school cycles; (iii) less abstract curricula, strengthening practical aspects and useful for «real life» and finding work/employment. In other words, MEOs argue that the educational system in itself presents some problems that need to be changed.

More or less explicitly, some suggestions were made directed at the school system. According to MEOs, the school has to adjust to pupils' needs in various aspects, rather than disguising the cases of underachievement and making it look like success. Some MEOs advocated that a good way of doing this is to work «from within» the school. The responses that fall into this category put strong responsibility in the school and demand it to proceed with the necessary efforts, since nowadays schools are well equipped and demonstrate the necessary conditions to solve problems:

> Presently, schools provide the necessary infrastructures and all the comfort that can be expected so that it is possible to start working at the course level. … There is school underachievement and we recently read an article mentioning that thirty percent of year 9 pupils had already failed at this time of the school year. These are national results. And what does it mean? Simply that the work must be done from within… things must be set in motion. (LX-AT3)

7. Promoting school success rather than directly tackling underachievement and dropout

MEOs seem more committed to fostering school success than directly tackling school dropout, which is not seen as a problem, as shown above. This is consistent with their perspectives about the prevalence of dropout. On the other hand – probably not surprisingly – changes in educational policies do not seem to be a focus of MEOs concerns (Araújo, Sousa, Loureiro, Costa, & Portela, 2013). Instead, MEOs emphasise all kinds of support from the municipalities to schools, as well as to pupils and their families.

The strong relationship between families' economic and cultural needs and school achievement were recognised by MEOs together with the emphasis on social support initiatives from municipalities appear to be consistent – apparently one of their main strategies in education.

It is as if, in face of pupils' and their families' difficult economic and cultural conditions, MEOs respond that the municipalities attempt to come up with the «right solutions» by giving way to a set of actions in the area of education, such as social assistance programs, along with others of social and cultural nature. That is, more than talking about school underachievement and dropout, MEOs prefer to express what they can do to promote school success.

7.1. School success is improved by good conditions in schools

The study findings indicate that MEOs seem to believe that school success is improved by good material environment in schools and they tend to stress that municipalities have been developing several projects, namely concerning the improvement of school infrastructures. As it was widely recognised by most of the interviewees, well-equipped schools contribute to better learning and it is definitely the role of the municipalities not to fail in that endeavour:

> School facilities play an important role in pupils' learning (…) the fact that the spaces are both organised and attractive (…) actually accounts for better school results because we already have behavioural success with the schools. (LX-AT2)

> Creating working conditions in the schools and improving school achievement have been prioritized. (LX-AT9)

7.2. Improving school success through cooperation with the schools

For some MEOs, schools must change internally and municipalities are able to participate in the joint promotion of school success. MEOs say they praise school deeds (Costa et al., 2012), but schools are expected, even urged, to take the necessary steps to operate changes «from within», given that they already have the necessary conditions to change what needs to be changed. This means there are no excuses for schools not to do what has to be done. The role of municipalities is essentially of supporting education without overlapping with schools' work, since the school is a «specific world» in which outsiders should not interfere beyond legal boundaries:

> The municipality is totally open, but we cannot intervene (…) we have plenty of constraints, even legal constraints (...). To do something else, we had to go to the «source», the schools, and the schools have their own world, they command inside the school and we cannot go and act inside it. (VR-AT4)

Municipalities' openness to cooperate with schools in order to foster school success is stressed by most of the interviewees. This cooperation is said to occur in different areas, such as nutrition, transportation, staff allocation, and family support, but the fact that municipalities always act in cooperation with schools, trying to respond to their needs is also stressed:

> The municipality does contribute with everything, cooperating with school cluster efforts in order to bring children to school and everything that is asked, meals, school transportation, we do all those things. We always provide a solution. (VR-AT2)

7.3. Improving school success through social and cultural support beyond legal requirements

Nevertheless, according to MEOs, it is particularly within the field of social support to students and their families that municipalities play a major role. Once a strong relationship between families' economic and cultural deprivations and school underachievement is established, MEOs highlight municipalities' social support. Using varied strategies, school social and cultural assistance programs are seen as a means to promote school achievement. This can only be accomplished in cooperation among diverse entities with regard to children and family needs, and through several actions within the school social assistance program:

> Actually, we do what we can, when it comes to helping students through the school social assistance program. We even help them organise their personal and family management. Nowadays, families are facing serious difficulties coping with the European economic crisis, perhaps here more than anywhere else, and so the City Hall is preparing and will approve the regulations for a municipal school prize. This is an additional motivation that is not within the purview of the municipality, but, nevertheless, may be a good strategy in promoting school achievement and in motivating children. (VR-AT2)

As stressed by the majority of the interviewees, the municipalities look for strategies to foster school success that go far beyond the prescribed school social welfare. In cooperation with schools, municipalities are said to look actively for strategies to motivate children and promote school success in ways that are beyond the lawful and agreed requirements:

> We do everything we can in the area of school social welfare. We even go to the individual level, inside the family. Nowadays, the crisis is strong and the municipality is approving a municipal school award. This is also a motivation that is not included in the legal role of the municipality, but this strategy is adopted in order to foster school success and to motivate children. (VR-AT2)
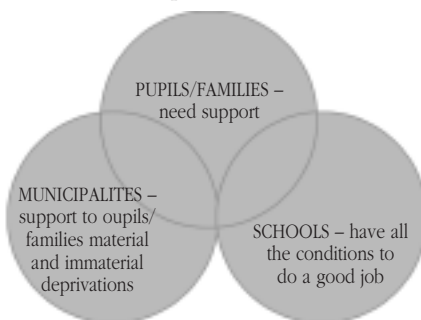
Final remarks

This paper focuses local authorities in charge of educational issues, following a European trend that is aimed at understanding the development of local governance in education, namely through the perspectives of different actors' (Agyemang, 2009; Payne, 2010; Chapman & Hadfield, 2010). Particularly, the paper is intended at shedding some light about MEOs perspectives on school disengagement, namely school underachievement and dropout.

To sum up, for the MEOs interviewed, school dropout is not a matter of concern, since it is non-existent or just residual, and frequently is disguised. On the other hand, concerning under-achievement, the interpretations vary from the «no more a problem» to the more sceptical one, based on the recognition of a real problem that needs to be addressed. These findings about municipal education officers (MEOs)' perceptions on school underachievement and dropout do not fully match national and municipal numbers about the topic, but rather they seem to over-estimate the tendency of strong decline in school disengagement in Portugal.

When explaining school underachievement, the main factors MEOs point out are families' conditions, including their «lack of education». There were also some respondents that related underachievement to the educational system, some of them arguing that schools should accomplish the work they have to do from within because schools are said to «finally» have all the conditions to tackle some of the main educational problems.

MEOs' perspectives that strongly relate school underachievement to family contexts are consistent with the municipalities' assumed role to try to balance family/social background difficulties with municipal strategies. It is as if MEOs had the main duty to supply what the pupils do not have at home, be it material (e.g. transportation, meals, even housing) or imma-terial (e.g. culture, travelling, sports), but being careful not to conflict with the school role. The figure below tries to illustrate these results:

FIGURE 1

MEOs views on the pillars of educative success

PUPILS/FAMILIES –
need support

MUNICIPALITES –
support to oupils/
families material
and immaterial
deprivations

SCHOOLS – have all
the conditions to
do a good job

MEOs argue that they locally respond to the new role elicited by the transference of powers between central and local government on educational matters. That is, they assume they have a role in regulating education at the local level, describing their role as mainly to support the attainment of school success, more than directly tackling underachievement and dropout. Stoer and Araújo (2000) had already underlined that LAs were also convened about the target of school for all and it seems that, in a way, the interviewees stand for the same idea. Acting in a middle tier, MEOs say their intervention develops in cooperation, mainly with schools, being that they are especially careful to never overlap schools (some «good practices» were already identified; see Araújo, Sousa, Costa, & Loureiro, 2012). The way they regulate their action, in line with (or contrary to) council members and other stakeholders, is likely to be related to these perspectives.

As mentioned above, MEOs bring political guidelines into practice, coordinating or just participating in a variety of negotiations, either centred in the municipalities or in the schools and other entities. They are partners of schools and other entities, be them local, regional or national, in most of the decision making to tackle local educational issues. In this research, the whole process of decentralisation of education appears to be developed by means of strategies, confrontations, and actions involve different rationales (Barroso, 2004). Being aware of the main actors' perspectives about key issues on the topic of school disengagement is likely to contribute to enlighten the complex relationships among all entities involved in the local regulation of education affairs. Further studies are needed in order to add more understanding about other stakeholders' perspectives in local education (namely councillors for education, teachers, school principals, parents) as well as the role of municipalities in the regulation of education, observing their decisions, behaviours, partnerships and / or networks.

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