LEARNING COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IN THE ALENTEJO – ANALYSIS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES

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Abstract

The diversity of the school population that currently attends school embraces a great cultural, social, ethnic richness that implies many challenges that need to be addressed effectively, so that all children, without exception, have the right to an (inclusive) education that responds to their (this) plurality. In this context, an inclusive school identifies and overcomes the barriers and obstacles caused by the students' circumstances that difficult their learning and participation in the life of the school and the community in which they live. By promoting and implementing differentiated pedagogical strategies that take into account and respect the singularity and specificity of each student, they can fulfil all their potential, promoting real participation, an increased sense of belonging and school success (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). The INCLUD-ED project, having identified Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) that are universal and transferable to all types of contexts (Flecha, 2015), aims to achieve school success for all, promoting social cohesion. In this process, it transforms schools into learning communities (LC), emphasising family and community interaction and participation as fundamental aspects. The present research has a qualitative nature, based on case studies, and aims to understand how schools which are implementing the INCLUD-ED project, located in Alentejo/Portugal, operationalise the guidelines for inclusive education. In this study, we used semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observation of SEAs in different contexts. The sample is made up of teachers, family members, volunteers and students, with the objective of understanding the degree of adhesion (and difficulties) in implementing this approach by the educational community. The aim is to find out which SEAs have been implemented, at which levels of education, what impact they have had on the inclusion of all students, on their educational success and learning, and, in general, on improving relationships and social coexistence between all members of the educational community, as well as understanding whether the school is understood as a LC, in the sense proposed by INCLUD-ED, or at what stage it is in this process. We discuss the impact of this approach on children´s learning and conviviality in educational community.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, schools, learning communities, INCLUD-ED project.*

1. Introduction

The student's diversity and the acknowledgement of their differences substantiates the importance that should be given to issues of inclusive education.

In this matter, we shouldn´t refer only to the inclusion of children and young people with difficulties or disabilities, as it was in the past (Roldán et al., 2021), but to all children and young people attending school. In this sense, we should refer to everyone that, not only reveal some kind of learning difficulty or disability, but also to all that are in a fragile and vulnerable social, economic, and cultural situation, that can lead to exclusion (Martins et al., 2023).

Inclusive education considers a holistic approach of the student, creating mechanisms, changes in school policies and practices, that are responsive and effective to address the individuality of each student, thus accommodating their needs and weaknesses and their strengths and potential as well. It also aims to enable real participation in school life, and to increase their sense of belonging and academic success (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

In Portugal, inclusive education is a legal imperative, as it is the law itself that establishes the principles and standards that "guarantee inclusion, as a process that aims to respond to the diversity of needs and potential of each and every student, through increased participation in the learning processes

and in the life of the educational community" (Decree-Law No. 54/2018, p. 2919). According with this document, each school must find ways of coping with students' differences and to adapt teaching processes to the individual characteristics and conditions of each student (Martins et al., 2023).

2. INCLUD-ED project, inclusion, and school as a learning community

The INCLUD-ED project - Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe, is a research project, coordinated by the Research Centre for Theories and Practices for Overcoming Inequalities – Community of Research in Excellence for All (CREA) at the University of Barcelona.

The INCLUD-ED project identified practices, successful educational actions (SEAs) in communities that improve academic results and coexistence, contributing to greater social cohesion, which should be implemented in schools that want to become learning communities (LC).

The SEA´s proposed for implementation in a LC are divided in two main groups: "inclusion actions, which are based on specific approaches to grouping pupils and allocating human resources. The second is successful types of family and community participation in schools, which are promoting school success" (Universitat de Barcelona, 2012, p. 20).

Therefore, the SEAs identified were interactive groups, extending learning time and dialogic reading. SEAs based on family involvement in schools consist in family involvement in learning activities, family education through dialogic literary gatherings, and participation in school evaluations and decision-making (Flecha, 2015).

A LC is a proposal for social and cultural transformation that starts in schools and spreads to the whole community through the participation of families and volunteers in school decisions and activities, and the implementation of a set of educational successful actions.

3. Case Study

Our case study was developed in a cluster of schools located in the south of Portugal, in the Alentejo's Region, made up of twelve schools from urban and rural communities. It covers school levels from pre-school to secondary education.

It has a school population of 1885 students, of which 142, that represent 7,5%, are foreign, from 17 countries and 4 continents (with particular emphasis on students from Brazil, Angola, India, China and Pakistan). Its staff consists of 240 teachers and 122 non-teaching staff.

This cluster of schools is implemented in an educational territory of priority intervention, due to the contexts of low socioeconomic status of the community it serves. It's implementing SEAs since 2019.

3.1. Materials and method

Our study has a qualitative nature, based on case studies. The data collection techniques used were semistructured interviews with teachers, parents, and community volunteers (as described in table 1), focus groups with students (table 2) and observation of SEAs in different contexts. Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed.

Table 1. Adults' interviews sample description.

Sample	Nº	Gender		Ages (years)	Sample description
	18	F	M	35 - 81	
Teachers	8	2	6	48 - 66	School headmaster Project coordinator Special education coordinator 2 Primary education teachers (implementing dialogic reading and interactive groups with primary education students) 2 Secondary teachers (implementing dialogic reading; attending Dialogic Pedagogical Training; liaising with Senior University 1 Special education teacher
Parents	8	1	7	35-46	4 Participants in interactive groups 4 With children enrolled in dialogic reading From those, 1 is an operative worker and 2 are teachers at the school; and 1 is a specialized expert of the municipality, also working at the school)
Volunteers	2		2	80 - 81	2 Senior University students usually engaged in SEAs

Of the 18 interviews carried out, 8 were with teachers, with different school roles. Another 8 were with parents, with different experience in participating in SEAs: some with experience in interactive groups, others with experience helping their children, at home, preparing dialogic reading. We have to highlight that some of the parents interviewed also have professional roles at the school: teachers and non-teaching staff. Of the latter, a specialised expert and an operative worker. We also interviewed 2 volunteers, Senior University students, usually engaged in SEAs.

Three focus groups were held with students from different educational levels (see table 2).

Table 2. Students' focus group sample description.

Students	Education Level	N. °	Gender		Ages (years)
			F	M	
Focus group 1	Primary	5	2	3	7 and 8
Focus group 2	Middle primary	5	4	1	11
Focus group 3	Secondary	7	4	3	14-16

One of the observed SEAs was a dialogical reading, in the school library, with the tenth graders, with 27 students (14 girls and 13 boys) and 3 teachers present (including the teacher/mediator), where a Vincent Van Gogh's painting was analysed. We also observed a dialogic literary gathering, in the school library too, open to everyone in the local community, which was attended by 19 people (17 women and 2 men): teachers, students, elderly people/students from the Senior University, representatives of the municipality, ...). A scientific paper concerning gratitude was discussed.

Our aim was to understand how this cluster of schools, which is implementing the INCLUD-ED Project, operationalizes the guidelines for inclusive education. Particularly:
- Which SEAs have been implemented, at which levels of education;
- Which degree of enrolment (and difficulties) in implementing this approach by the educational community.
- What impact they have had on the inclusion of all students, on their educational success and learning, and, in general, on improving relationships and social coexistence between all members of the educational community.
- Whether the school is understood as a LC in the sense proposed by INCLUD-ED, or at what stage it is in this process.

3.2. School case study – first conclusions

Our first conclusions, based on our case study, are that the implementation of the INCLUD-ED project was a challenge from the Ministry of Education (ME), in July 2019.

Since the beginning, training was a huge concern, and so ME (and CREA) provided initial training, in Lisbon, to four elements of the school, considered key elements to the implementation and dissemination of the project. As this school has its own training centre, it's possible to continue the training of teachers from this and other schools.

The main obstacles in the implementation of the project, besides the pandemia, had to do with the teachers, their role and profile. The chosen coordinator has to be someone that besides dynamizing the project in the whole school, must truly believe in it and has to be inspiring to others. There has been some resistance from some teachers in the implementation of the SEAs. Teachers have some concerns adopting approaches and methodologies different from those that they usually apply in the classroom. They think this will overload them with work, and they are very focused on the formal curriculum as well. There has also been some questions about its applicability at more advanced levels of education. For one hand regarding students ages, younger students can be more easily captivated for this type of action, and in the other hand, particularly in secondary education, there is a huge concern with the external assessment by

final exams. Moreover, it was reported that these actions are easier to develop within certain subjects, such as Portuguese, History and Maths, than Science and Chemistry.

In this cluster of schools, those interviewed consider that there are projects/initiatives that promote (and allow) inclusion at school. They give particular emphasis to the diversification of the existing training offer in the different education levels, mainly in the secondary, with a great range of vocational education, with a strong "hands-on" content, available to students. Regarding students who don't speak Portuguese, there has been a time reinforcement in Portuguese as a second language classes. Tutoring has also been a measure applied, with some effect, as well as sports-related projects dynamized through partnerships with external entities. In this matter, we must highlight measures applied to students with specific needs, emphasizing the partnership with the municipality, which ensures that the school has a team of specialized experts at its disposal.

The SEAs implemented so far are dialogic readings, mainly in primary education, and some in English classes at the secondary level; interactive groups in primary education classes; and monthly online dialogic pedagogical training.

In our study we identified four recurrent themes (that we transformed into categories of analysis) that emerged from the interviews and focus group transcriptions: (1) Impact of SEAs on learning and academic skills; (2) Impact of SEAs on socio-emotional competences and good coexistence between students; (3) Impact of SEAs on family involvement and communication and (4) Impact of SEAs on involvement and communication with the community (see table 3).

Table 3. Categories of analysis of adults and students.

	Interviews	examples	Focus group	examples	Total (%)
Category & definition	Adults		Students		
Impact of SEAs on learning and academic skills (evidence of gains in cognitive skills and students' academic progress).	37 quotes (12 adults)	"Developed love of learning" (DX5PS)	17 (10 students)	"We learn to read more" (YEPS2)	**54 (38,3%)**
Impact of SEAs on socio-emotional competences and good coexistence between students (evidence of improved social relationships between students and acceptance of differences).	50 (13 adults)	"Students who respect and support each other" (DX9PS)	5 (3 students)	"I think it's more of a convivial moment. We're all dealing with the same subject..." (XGPS6)	**55 (39%)**
Impact of SEAs on family involvement and communication (evidence of greater family involvement in the school, with impacts on students' well-being and learning, and improvements in school-family communication).	27 (13 adults)	"Families feeling integral part of the school as well" (DX6PS)	1 (1 student)	"I like it too (…) Because it's my mum, isn't it? And everyone likes to see their mums..." (YFPS2)	**28 (19,9%)**
Impact of SEAs on involvement and communication with the community (evidence of greater community involvement, and improvement in school-community communication).	5 (3 adults)	"We also help them... They like our presence" (VX16PS)	-	-	**4 (2,8%)**
Total					**141**

D, teacher; V, volunteer; X, female student; Y, male student

The impact of SEAs on socio-emotional competences and good coexistence between students is recognised as the biggest impact of SEAs on that cluster of school, followed closely by the impact of SEAs on learning and academic skills. It was also mentioned the impact of SEAs on family involvement and communication, and with less expression the impact of SEAs on involvement and communication with the community.

From our case study, we can also conclude that volunteers in the dynamized SEAs are mainly parents but there are also elderly people/ Senior University students.

The cluster of school is not yet considered a "real" LC, it is taking its first steps, however the existence of some small LCs is recognised by those interviewed.

The school's main challenge is the great linguistic, cultural, social, economic, geographical, ... diversity of its public, which triggers difficulties of various kinds, including lack of resources and language issues. Moreover, the classes have too many students, and their behaviour, often caused by society´s or families' devaluation of the school's role, raise some concern.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Our case study covers a very heterogeneous school population, as illustrated by the number of students' nationalities. This poses certain challenges that need to be addressed. With this purpose the cluster of schools develops a series of initiatives and projects aimed at inclusion. As far as students with specific needs are concerned, the (active) role of the partnership with the municipality in providing specialised experts should be highlighted.

SEAs are more widespread in primary education, which is justified by the profile of the teachers at this level of education, who are more motivated to implement them. However, with the transition to the next levels of education, there is a gap in the dynamization of SEAs, and only at the end of middle education or even secondary, do teachers resume the implementation of SEAs. The (equal) participation of students with specific needs in these actions should be underlined, as a result of the individualised work by the teachers who accompany them.

Also noteworthy is the innovative aspect of the English teacher's implementation of dialogic readings in his classes, which is recognised as being very enriching for the students, promoting and stimulating their ability to express themselves in this language.

The greatest impact of SEAs was related with socio-emotional competences and good coexistence between students. Learning and academic skills were also emphasized. Also, the project promoted better family and community involvement in school life. These outcomes support the school's desire to expand SEAs to all levels of education, starting with pre-school, as well as to broaden the range of actions organised.

Globally, the INCLUD-ED approach as well as the other projects implemented by the cluster of schools contribute to the inclusive process.

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