

THE VOICES OF FAMILIES AND CHILDREN IN SITUATIONS OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY: A REPORT OF A PROJECT

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Abstract

Taking as a reference the data from the report of the National Observatory for the Fight Against Poverty [1] and based on data from EU-SILC (2020), it is observed that 20% of the resident population in Portugal was in a condition of social and economic vulnerability, which corresponds to 1/5 of the resident population in Portugal. Another fact that the report highlights is related to the higher incidence of vulnerability in rural areas (21.1%), which presents a higher risk of poverty than in densely populated areas (13.3%) and medium populated areas (16.6%). Different studies such as those by Brandão [2], and Calejon [3] reveal that there is a relationship between the condition of social vulnerability of children and families and the school success of these children. Considering the right to quality education should be guaranteed to all children, it is important to know how these vulnerabilities and their consequences are perceived by families and children and how they may be conditioning their access to a quality education provided by the schools they attend. This paper presents a project that aims to study the paths of vulnerability and its possible causes through the voices of families and children who are in a condition of social and economic vulnerability. To this purpose, it will address the following question: what is the life path of families who are in a condition of social and economic vulnerability? Its objectives are: (i) to analyse the life path of families in a situation of social and economic vulnerability; (ii) to characterize the families in a situation of social and economic vulnerability, based on the voice of the actors; (iii) to understand the relation between the situation of vulnerability of families and children's school success; (iv) to analyse children's perception of their family situation and their school path; (v) to identify relevant mechanisms to prevent and/or overcome different social and economic vulnerabilities. Therefore, it focuses on eight families from the northern/interior region of Portugal and uses life narratives to survey the social reality under consideration. Hence, it is qualitative research, using semi-structured interviews with two previously developed scripts (one for adults and the other for children). It is important to highlight the social impact of this study which will provide a deep knowledge of families and children in situations of social and economic vulnerability, allowing a better understanding about the impact that certain vulnerabilities may have on children's school success, and it will identify relevant mechanisms to prevent and/or overcome them. This information is not limited to its apparent descriptive nature, but it may constitute an important knowledge source to be considered in the development of future intervention proposals regarding the prevention of vulnerabilities that may emerge during the research, and, more specifically, of those that may be related to the (in)success at school of children who experience them.

Keywords: social and economic vulnerability, school (in)success, voice of children and family.

1 INTRODUCTION

Children's schooling is marked by many factors. These factors may or may not influence school performance. Certain family characteristics may be related to children's school performance. For example, Saavedra [4] suggests that children's socioeconomic levels differentially influence school performance in different components of the curriculum. The lower the socioeconomic status of the family, the lower the school grades of both boys and girls. Also, the parents' schooling seems to have an influence. The author found that children whose parents had more schooling would have a better chance of being a good student and being able to get a higher education, compared to those whose parents had no higher education. In the same study, children whose parents had only the 12th grade obtained low school grades, leading to the belief that they pursue professions of less social prestige.

This study also considers that children, just like their parents, are exposed to situations of greater economic and, consequently, social fragility [4].

For Melo, Fonseca and Ferrarini [5] the socioeconomic status is considered a risk factor for school (in)success. It should be noted that the risk factor does not mean a cause, but rather that there seems to be a relationship between the two variables, in this case the socioeconomic status and school (in)success. Papalia, Olds, and Feldman [6] understand that socioeconomic status itself does not determine children's school performance, since the "difference comes from its effects on family life" [p.384]. According to the authors [4] children's school performance can be influenced by parents' involvement in their children's school life through motivation and transmission of attitudes towards learning.

According to Rosa [7], school (in)success has a multidimensional approach, as it involves personal, social, political, school and family factors, and these can be grouped according to the origin, intrinsic or extrinsic to the individual. At the personal level, the causes may be related to lack of will, motivation, psychomotor, sensory, or cognitive dysfunction, feeling of failure, willingness to work, difficulties in learning, or even other aspects related to cognition. At the family level, school failure may be associated with family dysfunctions, especially in the case of single-parent families, the parents' low cultural and educational level, the family's socioeconomic level, housing conditions, the support provided by the parents themselves for their children's studies, and the parents' expectations regarding their children's future. School failure may also be associated with the school itself,

It may originate from the schedule itself and its complexity, the quantity, difficulty and remoteness of the subjects to real situations, the school environment, the school principal and leadership styles, the pedagogical strategies and models used, the initial and continuing training of teachers, the type of competence assessment adopted and other educational policies in general [7, p. 87].

Academic performance may be related to socioemotional variables in children integrated in vulnerable contexts. Sagredo, Etchepare, Mendizábal and Wilson [8], in a study of Chilean children, about academic performance was related to cognitive factors, such as intelligence or metacognition, but also to socioemotional situations, including self-efficacy, satisfaction in school and level of commitment to the task.

In addition to social background, other factors may have a bearing on children's school development, such as socioeconomic, cultural, and cognitive factors. In this sense, in a study conducted in Germany with 9th grade biology students and their parents, Akukwe and Schroeders [9] found that the socioeconomic status of the family had a small effect on the children's school performance. And the parents' formal education had no effect on the children's school performance. However, they found that having books at home, coupled with parental competence, would prove significant in individual differences in biology skills. These latter two factors are related, according to the authors, to a cognitively active home environment. Put another way, the cultural capital transmitted by parents to children helps their children's school performance.

Parental participation can contribute to the educational success of children. For Gomes and Flores [10] when the family is involved in the school activities of their children there are more favorable conditions for the children's success in the educational process. But for this to occur it is primordial that the school and the family strengthen their relationships. In the study Gomes and Flores [10] conducted with parents and children from 1st to 5th grade, about their participation in their children's studies, it was observed that parents are aware of the positive implications that their participation can have in the school life of their children, but when the teachers were heard on the subject, they said that the parents' speech is not confirmed in practice. The authors concluded that

the existence of difficulties has contributed to the distance between family and school. The first is the lack of time, as confirmed by many parents, and the second is the lack of support and tools to accompany the families of their students [10, p. 485].

In a study by Annunziata, Hogue, Faw, and Liddle [11] of 211 African American adolescents living in high-risk neighborhoods who were attending grades 6, 7, and 8, family cohesion was found to have beneficial effects on school engagement especially when good parenting practices exist. These family factors are protective against various compromising behaviors in these adolescents.

According to Luz and Lucion [12] the school holds an important role with children who are in a situation of social vulnerability, this according to the study conducted with children in the 3rd and 4th grades of elementary school. The authors observed that most of the children were in great weakness in relation to school performance, which may be related to the lack of family motivation and the view of the world that the children had. The importance these children gave to school was limited to learning how to read

and write. These children could not see the importance of school in other aspects of their holistic development. Despite being children who lived in a state of social vulnerability, there was little knowledge about the importance of school in their lives.

Therefore, it is possible to relate school performance to emotional, cognitive, cultural factors, among others. For a better performance of children in a situation of social vulnerability, a measure to be observed is the participation of parents in the education of their children [10]. For this, it is important to understand the meaning of social and economic vulnerability.

The concept of social and economic vulnerability is related to the compromised well-being of a given group or people. However, we must also consider certain characteristics, such as education, age, gender, income, family composition, and professional training, since economic and social vulnerability can be greater or lesser, ranging from inclusion to social exclusion.

For Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel [13] the term vulnerability is the gateway to discuss issues of inequality or adversity, i.e., the concept serves as an anchor for the consideration of various interests and concerns, of which insecurity, economic or social disadvantage, limited coping capacity, as well as unmet needs can be cited.

This study aims to analyze the social and economic vulnerability of families. The well-being of this group or people according to data from the EU-SILC 2020 addressed in the Report on poverty and social exclusion authored by the National Observatory for the Fight Against Poverty (ONLCP) [1] indicates the existence of 20% of the resident population in Portugal at risk of poverty or social exclusion, i.e., 1/5 of the population was in a situation of social and economic vulnerability in 2020. The most vulnerable groups are women (20.9%), children (21.9%), the unemployed (54.2%) and the

families consisting of two adults and three or more dependent children (43.12%), one-adult families with dependent children (32.5%), and families consisting of only one adult (29.4%), particularly women (32.5%). [1, p. 5]

In addition to the most vulnerable groups, vulnerability is greater for the population with low levels of education, people with basic education or less, followed by secondary or post-secondary education, which means that the higher the education, the lower the risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Also considering the risk of poverty and according to the Report Portugal, Balanço Social by Peralta, Carvalho and Esteves [14] in 2019 the risk of poverty reached higher the "people with lower education (21.9% for people with complete education up to basic education), in single-parent families (25.5%) and residing in rural regions (21.1%)" [14, p. 17].

Therefore, it is possible to observe the factors that condition children's school performance, beyond socioemotional, cultural, and cognitive factors since the social vulnerability of families may be related to children's school performance.

It is observed that the impact of family vulnerability on children's success in school can be remedied, according to the literature consulted, through parental involvement in their children's school life through motivation [6], by parental participation [10], having books at home and parental competence in developing a cognitively active environment [15], activities at home that stimulate children's academic skills [16], and finally, working with children on the important role that school has in everyone's life [17].

In this context, a research project is being developed in the north of mainland Portugal, which aims to study the paths of social vulnerability and its possible causes through the voices of families and children who are in a situation of social and economic vulnerability. To this end, the following question will be answered: what is the life path of families who are in a situation of social and economic vulnerability? Its objectives are: (i) to analyze the life path of families in a situation of social and economic vulnerability; (ii) to characterize the families in a situation of social and economic vulnerability, from the voice of the actors; (iii) to understand the relationship between the situation of vulnerability of families and the children's school success; (iv) to analyze the children's perception of their family situation and their school path; (v) to identify relevant mechanisms to prevent and/or overcome different social and economic vulnerabilities.

2 METHODOLOGY

The research being developed is qualitative in nature. The choice of this methodology is justified, according to Creswell [18], as it is "a means to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem" [p.26]. As a technique and instrument for data collection, we chose the semi-structured interview based on a script previously developed in the context of this project.

The interview option, according to Amado [19], is one of the powerful means to reach the understanding of human beings and information from the most varied fields. The semi-structured interview is characterized by starting from a previous plan - a script "where it is defined and recorded, in a logical order for the interviewer, the essential of what is intended to be obtained, although, in the interaction it will be given a great freedom of response to the interviewee" [p.208].

Regarding interviews, which rely on children's participation, according to Graue and Walsh [20] it is emphasized that their purpose "is to get children talking about what they know" [p.139]. However, conducting a typical, sit-down interview with a child is not an easy task. Children may not have much experience talking to adults. It is possible that few children have had experiences where the adult wants them to narrate aspects of their lives. Therefore, the first step in interviewing children, according to the authors previously mentioned [20] "is to negotiate the process, saying what it is about and how it is done." [p. 140]. A useful strategy with pre-school and primary school children is to conduct the interview in pairs or small groups, because they help each other with the answers and "are more relaxed when they are with a friend rather than alone with the adult" [p. 141].

In this sense, as an instrument for semi-structured interviews we prepared two scripts with thematic blocks and objectives, according to Amado [19]. A first script will be directed to the families and another to the children. After the construction of the scripts, they were analyzed by two specialists to verify their adequacy. In a following moment, after the necessary adaptations suggested by the specialists, the data collection will be carried out.

A tape recorder was used to record the interviews, with due authorization from the participants. The interviews were later transcribed and analyzed with the help of the MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 software, and their content categorized according to the assumptions highlighted by Bardin [21], "aiming to obtain (through systematic and objective procedures of description of the content of the messages) indicators (quantitative or not) that allow for the inference of knowledge concerning the conditions of production/reception (inferred variables) of these messages" [p.42].

The project has as its context families and children who are in a situation of social and economic vulnerability belonging to three different municipalities in the Northern Region and sub-region of Trás-os-Montes (NUTS III).

The criterion for choosing research subjects is to select 8 families and their children from three different municipalities. The project is under development and will end in January 2023. Data collection is scheduled for October and November 2022.

2.1 Research Ethical Issues

Regarding the ethical issues the present study is sensitive to Graue and Walsh's [20] placement that ethical behavior is linked to the attitude that one brings to the field of investigation and to the personal interpretation of facts, because entering people's lives is an invasion that must be preceded by permission. This is because, "to enter other people's lives is to be an intruder. Permission must be obtained, permission that goes beyond that which is given in the form of consent. It is permission that permeates any respectful relationship between people" [p. 77]. According to the authors [18], in research with children, "it is the children who hold the knowledge, give the permission, and set the rules - for the adults" [p. 77].

According to Pedro [22] the main ethical issues characterizing qualitative research in education with children that stand out in the literature are the following: 1) informed consent; 2) confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy; 3) cost-benefit analysis for participating in the research; and 4) reward.

For the present research work, the observance of these principles will be as follows.

Regarding the first ethical issue, the informed consent will provide information about the project to be developed, stating the objectives as well as the results to be achieved. It will be made clear that participants may, at any time, stop participating in the project if they wish, and their decision to leave will be understood and respected. Three types of informed consent will be used: one for adults who will give the interview, in which they consent to participate, one for children who will give the interview, in which they consent to do so, and one for parents whose children will give the interview, in which they consent to their children's participation.

Regarding the second ethical issue, confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy, we will try to protect children and families from being identified in any way, by creating an alphanumeric code to allow us to refer to them. Therefore, all the answers will be kept anonymous and only used for academic purposes. The interviews will be conducted in a familiar and comfortable environment for the participants.

Regarding the third ethical issue, the cost-benefit analysis for research participation, all decisions made by the researchers will be to minimize the risks and enhance the benefits to the participants.

Regarding the fourth and last question, reward, we are considering rewarding the children, in a symbolic way, at the end of the interview as a form of thanks for their participation in the project. In this regard Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson and Fitzgerald [23] suggest as an example a certificate of appreciation as a reward, accompanied by a thank you for participation.

3 RESULTS

The aim of this project is to study the paths of vulnerability and its possible causes through the voices of families and children who are in a situation of social and economic vulnerability. Through the life narratives of the study participants, it is intended to characterize the families in a situation of social and economic vulnerability to then try to understand the relationship between the situation of vulnerability of families and the children's academic success. This is because according to Do Vale, Silva, Duarte, Bezerra and Pimenta [24] those who for some reason are in a situation of social vulnerability, which may even be of emotional or financial nature, have problems with school performance.

Through the children's narratives we aim to analyze their perceptions about their family situation and about their schooling.

With this information, it is thought to be possible to identify mechanisms that may help prevent and/or overcome different social and economic vulnerabilities, as well as school failure.

4 CONCLUSION

It is not yet possible to draw conclusions within the scope of this research, since it is still in progress. According to the literature cited in this article, we can see that some factors may influence the academic performance of children whose families are in situations of social vulnerability. Through the voices of the participants, it will be possible to characterize the families as well as to verify the relationship that such characteristics may have on the children's school life. Through the voices of the children, it will be possible to observe their school paths. At the end of the study, it is expected to identify support mechanisms for families in social and economic vulnerability.

First, it is important to highlight the social impact of this study. It will provide a deep knowledge of the situation of families and children in situations of social and economic vulnerability, allowing a better understanding of the relationship between this vulnerability and the children's school (in)success, and to identify relevant mechanisms to prevent and/or overcome difficulties, if we consider they exist. This information is not exhausted in its apparent descriptive character but may constitute an important knowledge base to be considered in the design of future intervention proposals regarding the prevention of vulnerabilities that emerge during the research, and more specifically those that may be related to the (in)success at school of the children who live them. Thus, this study is part of the research strategy of the Center for Research in Basic Education (CIEB), since it focuses on one of the aspects that allows a deeper understanding of basic education, as a fundamental basis for learning and for the development of societies.

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