

SCHOOL SUCCESS: CONCEPT, FACTORS AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The Project "Beliefs, knowledge and practices of teachers" was developed as part of a multiple action plan intended to address school failure, developed by the Intermunicipal Community of Terras de Trás os Montes (CIM-TTM), Portugal. This article presents a part of the study devoted to its central theme: school success. From the theoretical research carried out it was realized that there is a multiplicity of "school successes", the explicitness of the concept in order to unveil the meanings that underlie the various statements being rare [1]. In the project carried out, the meaning assigned to it is centered upon the development of competences, seen according to the curriculum document *The Profile of Students Leaving Compulsory Education* [2], as complex combinations of knowledge, skills and attitudes, which children and young people should acquire as indispensable tools for exercising a full, active and creative citizenship. This project involved as participants the leaders (school cluster directors, class headmasters and curricular department coordinators) and the teachers of all levels and cycles of education of eleven school clusters integrated in the region covered by the CIM-TTM. In the part of the study here presented, group interviews were used with the leaders of each School group for data collection. For data analysis we used content analysis and considered a priori defined categories and shaped by the theory: meanings of school success, success factors and strategies to promote success.

As results of the study, in relation to the meaning, factors and strategies of success, the following were highlighted: (i) relativity of the concept and some criticism of educational policies; (ii) association of the concept with attaining positive grades and student progress; (iii) concept defined according to the profile in the above-mentioned curriculum document; (iv) attention to the uniqueness of students; (v) indication of personal factors (students' future prospects and expectations), family and social factors as promoters of school success, and (v) indication of the educational policy on curricular flexibility as a favorable framework for the implementation of support measures and individualized teaching that contribute to the success of all students.

Keywords: Educational success, concept, factors, strategies.

1 INTRODUCTION

This article presents part of the study entitled Beliefs, knowledge and practices of teachers, developed under the Integrated and Innovative Plan to Fight School Failure (PIICIE), of the Intermunicipal Community of Terras de Trás-os-Montes (CIM-TTM). The research on the three dimensions highlighted, as well as how they relate to each other, assumed particular relevance in this study. It is assumed that beliefs and knowledge help teachers to control the uncertainty and ambiguity that teaching practice presents. The purpose of this article is to present the beliefs expressed by teachers, invested in school leadership roles, about school success. It is assumed that knowing and analyzing beliefs contributes to understanding and improving teachers' educational processes. Concerning the meaning attributed to beliefs, we followed the lead of [3] when he employs elucidative terms for the definition of this concept:

attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, biases, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, social strategy (p. 309).

Since school success is the central focus of this paper, it is necessary to clarify this concept or concepts. There is a multiplicity of "school successes", and its explicitness in order to unveil the meanings that underlie the various statements is rare [1]. Following this observation, [1] specifies four focuses:

- (i) academic success is what is measured in external exams and in summative assessment tests;
- (ii) academic success is the number of children and young people who pass from one year to the next and from one cycle of studies to the next;
- (iii) academic success is the result of a teaching

and learning process that provides the learning and acquisition of knowledge that are consigned to it; (iv) school success is a school dynamic that involves all its main players - teachers, students, parents and school as a whole - and is concerned with creating the conditions for effective learning by each and every student (p. 40).

If in the first two focuses the evaluative obsession and the administrative emphasis are evidenced, based on the belief that national examinations are the guarantee of the quality of learning, it is in the second that resides the "daily and humble action that can make everyone learn, even if in differentiated pedagogical environments" (p. 41) [1]. It is, therefore, in this sense that we place the concept, which should translate into the development of competencies, seen, according to The Profile of Students Leaving Compulsory Education [2], as complex combinations of knowledge, skills and attitudes that children and young people should acquire as indispensable tools for the exercise of full, active and creative citizenship in the information and knowledge society in which we live. However, we cannot ignore the fact that there is "a constellation of variables and circumstances that, in a more or less direct and interrelated way, influence students' learning and academic performance" (p. 3629) [4]. Students' and teachers' personal variables, educational interactions, and the educational environment are noted as the main factors of success [4]. Students' personal variables are presented as factors related to their motivation, their abilities, and their attitudes toward school. The personal variables of teachers refer to their scientific and pedagogical competence and also to their personality. Concerning the educational interactions between teacher-student, communication, leadership, and teaching and evaluation methods are indicated. The relational environment at school encompasses interpersonal relationships, dynamics and teamwork, institutional climate, and leadership and coordination skills.

2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in the study is based on a qualitative and quantitative perspective in data collection and analysis. Data collection took place in the school clusters of the eleven municipalities that make up the CIM-TTM. Data collection, in this part of the study, focused on interviews with leaders (school cluster directors, class headmasters and coordinators of curriculum departments). The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed, giving rise to protocols identified by acronyms (School cluster director A01D...A11D; Curriculum department coordinator A01CT...A11CT; Class/group leader A0Dt...A11Dt).

In the treatment of the study data, we performed a content analysis of the corpus consisting of all the data from the interviews with the leaders. The content analysis was organized around three chronological poles: "pre-analysis, exposure of the material and treatment of the results" (p. 121) [5]. Thus, the first activity consists of floating reading, which refers to the "contact with the documents to be analyzed and getting to know the text, letting oneself be invaded by impressions and orientations" (p. 122) [5], followed by the determination of categories, based on the data referenced therein.

In this study, the categories and subcategories were defined a priori (based on the interview script), but refined and improved based on the collected data, with the sentence or set of sentences as the unit of analysis. The analysis of the collected data was performed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo.

Table 1 shows the subcategories of the category under analysis - school success - included in the beliefs dimension.

Table 1. School success category

<i>Subcategory</i>	<i>Indicators</i>
Meaning of school success	Association with grades/academic success Association with personal success Relationship with school dropout Relativity of meaning
Promoting success	Success factors (student-centered, teacher-centered, family-centered, sociocultural) Types of strategies (individualizing teaching, giving more time to accomplish tasks, curricular adaptation) Constraints/limitations to its promotion

The category school success includes the subcategories: meanings of school success and promotion of success. The subcategory concerning the meanings of school success refers to the multiplicity of meanings of the concept and includes the following indicators: association with grades/academic success; association with personal success; relationship with school dropout and relativity of meaning. In the subcategory promotion of success, the elements that influence success and the practices/dynamics/methods and techniques that promote it can be perceived, including the following indicators: factors of success (student-centered, teacher- and family-centered, and sociocultural); types of strategies (individualization of teaching, giving more time to complete tasks, curriculum adaptation); and constraints/limitations to the promotion of success.

3 RESULTS

The results are organized according to the defined subcategories: Meaning of success and Promotion of success.

3.1 Meaning of success

In the subcategory Meaning of success, the difficulty in clarifying the ideas is assumed: "I've heard so much about educational success that I'm a little confused about it" (A06D). The understanding is associated with the grades obtained and the academic success of the students, translated by a final grade "it is to have 5 in every subject or 20 in every subject" (A06Dt) and questioned "What is weighted?" (A06D), the answer to which is "the final grade" (A06Dt). In these statements one finds similarities with the idea expressed by [6] when they state that "the school model is results-oriented" (p. 27). It is considered to be an "imposed" success, critically assumed in the question "success is studying and getting good grades?" (A05), stressing that "it is the success we are used to, but success is often not that" (A06D).

Within this framework, it is pointed out that "success is fictitious" (A10CT) and that "success is relative" (A04Dt), since it is understood that it should be more associated with the student's progress than with the construction of knowledge, in the sense of knowing whether "he/she acquired the essential learning and competences in the different subjects" (A10CT). It is admitted that "we are often confusing success with knowledge" (A10CT), and that when faced with the question "do students leave with the knowledge that is shown on the scoresheet? The answer is no" (A10CT). Success should not be confused with obtaining good grades, considering that in many cases this may mean "that students were able to reproduce knowledge perfectly" (...) but does not necessarily mean that these results translated into significant impacts on their learning" (p. 27) [6].

The current model of society is indicated by the participants as promoting this perspective of success:

We are training individuals who are going to live according to a model that society has more or less idealized - an individual who is successful: completes his schooling in twelve years, goes to university, gets a master's degree, gets a great job, manages to buy a house or an apartment, furnishes the house, has children, takes out a loan to buy a bigger house, has a debt to pay off in 30 years, works for a bank, and in the end - dies and doesn't understand what he's been doing (A11Dt).

There is also dissatisfaction with educational policies: "the Board of Education wants success regardless of whether or not the student has acquired [the essential learning]" (A10CT); "success is not just having good students/bad students, good teachers/bad teachers, there are many bureaucratic issues sometimes behind it" (A10Dt); "the Board of Education turns things around a bit. It puts school success in numbers and for me school success is not so much in the numbers" (A07CT). It is evident, within this scope, that "what matters (...) are the statistics" (A10CT) and "[the classifications] are at the level of the rankings" (A04CT). Still according to this perspective, it is also highlighted that the model of access to higher education is one of the causes for "distorting" (A10D) the meaning of success.

This meaning of success is, in general, considered reductive, understanding that although it is "natural" (A10D) the satisfaction with the existence of high classifications "is not as important as that in educational success" (A10D). It can be understood that it accounts for "an increasingly present logic: the evaluative obsession and administrative emphasis", to which "underlies the belief that it is the national examinations that guarantee the quality of learning" (pp. 2-3) [1]. Expressing a critical eye on this way of understanding success, the author states that it is, to such an extent, "that very rarely does the rhetoric that underlies them address issues such as teaching and learning conditions, cultural diversity or pedagogy" (p. 3) [1].

In this context, meanings of success that focus on the construction of knowledge, are expressed by participants, attributing relevance to equipping students "with knowledge" so that they "can cope with life and life's challenges" (A04CT), and expressing recognition that:

If we consider success in the sense of having tools to solve situations, solve problems, then yes, we are in a completely different dimension of educational success. (a06dt);

It translates into the acquisition of significant learning that can be mobilized to solve future situations, for the adult life of those students we have now in school, and is also a contribution to the exercise of active citizenship. More than accumulating knowledge, it is knowing how to use it in their lives and for society (a02d);

To be able to have good academic results, but also to have that ability to adapt to different types of work and be able to deal with problems, (...) Overcome difficulties. It is not only academic success, but also developing those skills to deal with what is different and unexpected (a08dt). It also has to do with other things, it has to do with the student's participation in the life of the school, participating in the theater, participating in school sports, helping another classmate who needs help. For me, all these are areas of educational success and because this will allow you, when one reaches adulthood, to be an adult with skills and to be a valued adult in society (A08D).

Reinforcing this idea, it is argued that: "success will be thus, a student who is able to solve situations that, at the outset, he/she did not even seem to be able to solve" (A06Dt) and in a very peremptory sense the connection to the fulfillment of the presented in the document Profile of Students Exiting Compulsory Schooling [2] is made: "is the way to define the Profile of students at the end of compulsory schooling and, once and for all, focus on it and fulfill it, and that is what we want" (A09D).

The association of personal success with the future also emerges, being described as: "a way of facing life and facing the future with the necessary tools for survival, in quotes, in the environment where he will then develop his activity" (A03D); "it is to achieve the goals that he set for himself, for his future" (A07Dt); "success is victory and is the victory in the life of each one" (A04CT).

In this line, it cannot be understood that the grades are no longer valued, but that the learning and competencies built by the students and recognized as essential for personal and professional success should be considered above all, arguing: "that they have good grades and marks, but if they leave school and if they are able to face all the challenges they will face in life, that is success" (A04CT).

If, on the one hand, "the students' success is not only limited to school" (A10CT), on the other hand, the school is pointed out as indispensable to "work on academic success" (A05D), highlighting its role so that everyone can "work on personal and social skills, necessarily, because that is what makes citizens that we want" (A05D). It is also explained that not only academic success should be considered, but also the potentialities and specificities of each person: "it is not only the student in academic terms, it is the student who, maybe has that minimum grade, but has all the values to succeed in life and that is what is most important" (A05D). School appears as responsible for the student's success as a citizen: "the most important thing for me in educational success is that the school effectively manages to fulfill its mission, which is to prepare students for what will be their future in a society, a participatory and constructive future" (A10D).

The student's participation in his or her learning and development process is emphasized, as well as the school's responsibility to facilitate and support the definition and achievement of goals that help attaining a successful educational and life path:

First of all a student must define what his/her goal-keeper are, and if the school can prepare the students for what they have outlined as their goals, to make them see that they have to outline goals, whatever they are, but they have to outline goals and from there if the school starts by doing that, (...) I think the school played its role (a10d).

Following this line of thought, a perspective of success focused on the uniqueness of each student is perceived, relating it "with goals and with what each student can do and can achieve" (A04CT) and understanding that a student is successful when "within his/her abilities, he/she gives the maximum and acquires (...) the set of knowledge, attitudes and values" (A04Dt) considered essential. In this context, it is mentioned that "there are two ways to measure success: academic success can be measured, but, as far as I'm concerned,, the students' success has to do with individual success and learning" (A04CT). The importance of the school offering opportunities so that the student can follow his/her path to success is underlined: "the student has to (...) succeed (...), what we need to have is an alternative for him/her, at that level (...), failure is not a fatality" (A10CT); "The important thing is a school where everyone can

learn, which is different from a school for everyone" (A10CT). It is considered important "to know what a kid has, it is to take from each kid, that is educational success because a lot of kids will never get more, in academic terms, than 3, in terms of knowledge, but a 3 for them is much more difficult to achieve than a 5 for others" (A06D).

The speeches emphasize the role to be assumed by the school to promote the students' academic success, stating: "the great challenge of the school is to create autonomous and thinking citizens" (A04CT); that they build "the essential learning (...) that are responsible, that have citizenship bases" (A04CT); "educational success is that - educating the individual to be healthy" (A11Dt); "basically to succeed is to be a responsible, active, critical and... how should I say... cooperative with others, right?" (A10Dt); [that the student] is able to acquire critical thinking and intervention, to be a citizen" (A04Dt). The school is thus attributed the function of:

Providing the child, the student, or the adult, or the future teacher, the future employee, the worker, with tools, so that he can, with a certain autonomy, be able to play his role well and be useful to society and also see it as a mission and be useful to the environment where he lives and be able to contribute with his effort to the social welfare, or to the welfare of the country, in this case the world (A03D).

It is also understood that the student can "be knowledgeable about the territory, be appreciative of the territory and have a real notion of it when you leave here (school)" (A10Dt). In this line, it is considered that "success is a global success, it is success as a person and as a professional" (A05D).

The happiness of the student is very present in the following expressions: "to feel fulfilled, to feel happy and not to work for competing, although now it is more and more this competition and this daily struggle and they are not happy" (A07Dt); "educational success is based mainly on the ability of students to make conscious choices, to have initiative, leadership skills, the ability to be entrepreneurial and to be happy" (A11Dt).

The relationship between success and dropping out is an issue that is also highlighted: "to succeed is also not to drop out" (A10Dt); "for there to be educational success, it is essential that there is no school dropout" (A10D). This idea is reinforced with determination:

I think it is very clear that as long as there are dropout rates, as long as there is a student in a school who leaves the educational system, educational success is compromised. Educational success requires a dropout rate of zero (...) as long as students are left by the wayside either by dropping out or by excessive retentions, then clearly there is no educational success (A10D).

In summary, this point highlights the difficulty in clarifying the concept of school success and its association with grades and results. A dissatisfaction with educational policies is expressed, as well as the need for success to be associated with the construction of knowledge and development of skills, to the resolution of situations; to the connection with what is expressed in the document Profile of Students Leaving Compulsory School [2] and the uniqueness of the student, among other aspects.

3.2 Promoting success

As for the subcategory Promoting success, several aspects are identified, some more student-centered, others more teacher- and family-centered, as well as sociocultural factors.

There are several factors "that contribute to student success" (A10CT), but that these "cannot be focused only on the school" (A10CT). The need to consider that there are factors that can facilitate or inhibit success at school is emphasized, so that "it has to be put into perspective" (A04D). To explain the idea presented, it is mentioned that "it is very easy to talk about success when we talk about, for example, a student who goes to the theater or has parents at home who advise him to read books and who read, (...) that have interesting cultural references and may have another type of development" (A04D).

Regarding this aspect, the existence of a great diversity of students is highlighted, "there are those who come to learn and are eager to learn, want to learn, and there are those who come completely uninterested and that we try to grab and try to motivate them to create a liking for school" (A07CT). Therefore, it is considered that there is more success when:

a student who came completely disorganized and completely destabilized and the school manages that he emotionally starts to motivate himself little by little, even without great results, (...) this more successful than a student who comes from a household, a stable family background,

with a good background, and comes to school and wants to learn and learns and has good results (A07CT).

The student's willingness to be a lifelong learner and to assume that learning is not centered exclusively in school is highlighted as a factor promoting success, "if he/she is willing to effectively perform continuous learning, he/she will be a good student and will be a successful person" (A08Dt).

There are also references to other situations, such as: "we have more than 50% of students with specific needs, requiring school social action, so the success has to be necessarily different and we cannot assess them all by the same yardstick" (A04D). It is therefore considered that success is also influenced by factors that relate to families: "it has to do with family and social experiences" (A10CT); "there are children with parents with higher literacy levels and if we compare their school success is relatively higher than those whose parents cannot read or write" (A06Dt); "[success] is easy if the students are committed and if they have a rearguard that helps them" (A05D).

The perspectives of the future are presented with a clear weight in the student's success, while for some "it is enough to have a 10, because they want to finish the 12th grade and want to go into an area other than higher education" (A06Dt), "there are others who with 17 are almost in tears. It depends on their perspective of the future" (A06Dt).

Students' low expectations for the future also act as a barrier to motivation for success:

They have the notion that there are many people with a diploma in hand and who then ask: why have I been studying all these years? To become a supermarket cashier, not to devalue the profession, right? But they could have fewer qualifications and they would have gotten the same kind of job. And I find it a bit difficult to deal with all this. Trying to motivate them to always try to be better, because that is what we try to say, if you have an average of 17 you can choose courses, if you have an average of 12 you cannot choose courses (A06Dt).

The homogeneity/heterogeneity of the class composition is a factor with a clear influence on the students' success, considering that "classes are too heterogeneous and they lose even the best students, because they get completely stifled" (A10Dt). The "absolute" conviction emerges that there would be "much more success" (A10Dt) if the work were developed in more homogeneous classes.

Strategies promoting success are clearly explained, such as "support measures and individualized teaching" (A06Dt), and the implementation of curricular flexibility has favored the development of some of them, as the following examples mention: "measure 4, which addresses the measure of success, is where we created a coordinator. This global coordinator is in charge of failure in English, mathematics, Portuguese, physics and science" (A01D); "we have a self-evaluation team which is also foreseen in the flexibility, that monitors these issues and gives us an indication of what we have been doing, the success we have been achieving" (A04D). In this context, it is noted that "we have students who passed the seventh and eighth year with five or six negative marks, but they passed. They went through and so are now preparing plans for them, this would not be possible if it were not for flexibility" (A01D); and also that:

The principals have done a great job, the teachers try to address these problems as well, but we can't really just focus on the students because success is really about the content and the students. Everything is interconnected and I think today we also start through flexibility and also through universal measures. All right, all those measures are important for us to achieve student success and have that sensitivity and adopt all those measures (A10Dt).

In summary, it is important to take into consideration the diversity of factors that can influence school success, as well as the adoption of strategies that help students to enjoy opportunities to be successful in their learning and development, promoting efforts to overcome possible constraints/limitations encountered.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The beliefs about school success, in this study, focused mainly on obtaining positive grades and student progress, the relativity of the concept and the critical perspective towards educational policies, the inclusion of knowledge, skills and attitudes that prepare students for the challenges of society and life, as well as to meet their uniqueness and to be autonomous, responsible, active, critical, active and happy citizens.

Based on the analysis of success and in conjunction with other data from the study Teachers' Beliefs, Knowledge and Practices, some recommendations emerged, among which are: ensuring student success and ensuring an inclusive and quality education for all. This is based on the assumption that the fundamental focus of school activity is the development of the curriculum and learning, and it is

important to recognize the added value of student diversity. This implies the adequacy of teaching and learning processes to the characteristics of students, their particularities and individual conditions. From here emerges the need to reflect on the concept of success, considering that there is not only one school success, there are several forms of success. Therefore, it is considered that success at school will be the greater the closer it is to educational success.

It is finally recommended to ensure and diversify the teaching and learning strategies taking into account the involvement of students, it being essential to interrelate intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and to recognize that the motivation and degree of autonomy to learn varies from student to student. It is also suggested: the creation of conditions for the school to assume itself as a privileged space for Development Education/Education for Global Citizenship; the recognition of the impact of technologies on human development and its reflection in teaching and learning processes; the understanding of assessment as an integral part of the teaching and learning process and the design of concrete strategies for mutual involvement, interaction and communication of school-family-community.

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