

Presented at ECER2018 Emerging Researchers' Conference, Free University of Bolzano,
Bolzano, Italy; 3-4 September

Schools at crossroads: how to respond to cultural diversity? A case study from urban Lisbon

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Europe has been experiencing demographic changes in student populations, especially in migratory urban areas where cultural diversity became ever more remarkable. Despite the fact that applying culturally relevant education lead to positive student outcomes (Aronson & Laughter, 2016), European schools do not have a shared vision on how to respond to cultural diversity, and are dependent on national contexts, and discourses on cultural diversity (Verhoeven, 2011). Although European policies have been recognizing the values of cultural diversity (Council of Europe, 2008); it is ambiguous if these initiatives eventually lead to creating equitable education for all, or to establishing renewed hierarchies (Lahdesmäki & Wagener, 2015). In the midst of competing national discourses, schools often find themselves at crossroads when addressing equality and difference. Schools usually follow the principles of “equality and inclusion”, “cultural pluralism” (Schachner, 2017), or simply “endorse majority culture” (Civitillo et al., 2016) when responding to cultural diversity. The institutionalization of non-tolerance, tolerance or respect/recognition generally happens through establishing representations of students’ and their interpersonal relationships in curricula, pedagogy and school structures (Maussen et al., 2012). Depending on how these initiatives are enacted, they carry the possibility of, on the one hand, transformation for equitable education, yet on the other hand, colour-blindness, othering or assimilation. In order to cope with change, research recommends schools to become learning organisations where a group of people learn together; committing themselves to achieve shared goals while constantly reflecting and modifying their actions accordingly to their contexts (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1995). Schools as learning organisations can be described by five main characteristics: school vision, culture, structure, strategies and policies (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach,

1995). On the field of diversity, Ainscow and Sandhill (2010) argue for the importance of organizational conditions, supported by the initiatives of leaderships when developing inclusive schools. Ainscow et al. (1994) identify six crucial conditions for transforming for diversity, such as enquiry and reflection; collaborative planning; staff, pupil and community involvement; staff development; coordination strategies and leadership.

As schools involve individual and collective mechanisms, it is important to study them from an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), in which individuals are situated in nested systems of human interactions. Additionally, school change for cultural diversity involves the transformation of both organizational conditions and the discourses on cultural diversity. Therefore, Verhoeven (2011) proposed a multiple embedded theory for studying cultural diversity in schools involving 1) national narratives and structures on macro-level 2) “local spaces of interdependency” of a region on meso-level, and 3) the dynamics of a single school on micro-level. Verhoeven (2011) argues that multiple embedded inequalities in these systems determine pupils’ opportunities, identities and capabilities in the future.

Urban trends in Portugal are similar to Europe. Lisbon region has been changing its demographic landscape due to postcolonial and contemporary migration (Malheiros & Vala, 2004). Regarding languages, Pereira (2006) found that students in metropolitan Lisbon used 58 languages in their homes, and 37 languages in school contexts. As a result of these changes, some schools in urban Lisbon find themselves at the intersections of historical and current movements, creating a situation where the interrelations of culture, nationality, ethnicity and language are highly complex. Consequently, there is a need to investigate how such schools, located in the center of migratory movements, respond to cultural diversity. The study aimed at understanding school mechanisms in transforming for cultural diversity in urban Lisbon. The research questions were the following 1) What are the responses given to cultural diversity on a school organizational level? 2) What is the role of leadership and teachers in these responses? 3) What are the underlying reasons explaining these responses?

This investigation applied an embedded qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) in order to reach a deep understanding of the school’s situation. Case study designs are fruitful in providing contextualized understanding, multiple perspectives and possibilities for varied, rich data collection. Selecting the case study design was crucial in order to

highlight the particularity of urban schools in Lisbon, whose reality might significantly differ from other contexts in Portugal. A school cluster in an urban district was purposefully selected according to the following criteria 1) the school cluster presented a multicultural student population, hosting students from 35 nationalities 2) school documents explicitly mentioned initiatives to respond to cultural diversity. Four schools belonging to this school cluster agreed on participating: three primary- and a secondary school. Data were gathered using multiple qualitative techniques, consisting of 1) micro-level school policies and documents 2) semi-structured, in depth interviews with 32 school practitioners (including 23 teachers, 5 leadership members and 4 support staff) 3) classroom and school event observations registered in ethnographic field-notes. Following the principles of a constructionist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2011), the study had several phases crisscrossing between the meso and micro levels of the school context, as well as moving between theorizing and empirical data collection. An initial round of data gathering involved assembling main documents and the first round of interviews with school practitioners. Moving to theoretical sampling, another set of interviews were conducted next. The third phase focused on the micro level, therefore classroom practices of eight teachers (at least one from each school in the cluster) were followed once a week for a month. School documents and additional interviews were collected simultaneously, as well as other school events were observed. Documentary, interview and ethnographic data were generated into a text-based database. Data were analysed applying a constructionist grounded theory approach; with a particular focus on situational analysis (Clarke, 2005). Utilizing situational, social world and positional maps made it possible to analyze the schools in their ecology, taking into account organizational as well as discursive practices. Situational analysis was also a strong tool in displaying and comprehending the context in which the school is embedded, the multiple actors of the organization such as leadership members and teacher communities, further, the positions taken related to cultural diversity. Data, situated in the maps, were analysed using the processes of open, axial and selective coding with a constant comparative approach (Böhm, 2004).

Findings confirm a positive attitude towards cultural diversity in the school cluster that is an important base in school transformation. It is also evident that the cluster is active in trying to establish extra services responding to students' needs such as Portuguese language courses, family and student support as well as an "integration plan". Leadership

has also been addressing staff development and collaboration to some extent. However, these actions exclusively target “foreign” students, reacting to their detected “problems”, such as not knowing Portuguese, low academic achievement, absenteeism and a threat of drop-out. Furthermore, these responses remained isolated and seemed to be the responsibility of appointed personnel, rather than the collective responsibility of school staff. This finding can be explained by the lack of a school vision, lack of collaboration school-wide, contradictory national legislation and narrow policy narratives. School practitioners often held conflicting views on the schools’ actions and articulated altering visions about the education of “foreign” students. This can be due to the different conditions of the four schools, as well as due to a mismatch between understandings on cultural diversity, interculturality, multiculturalism, integration and inclusion. These misunderstandings seem to create tensions between the several actors, leaving the school cluster at cross-roads: while some practitioners express the need for more inclusiveness for students and more professional development for practitioners, others seem to be less willing to change. These findings point to the need to establish a vision shared by school staff, starting with critically reflecting on concepts related to cultural diversity circulating in the school cluster, in order to understand how inclusion and discrimination are shaped by school practices. Furthermore, it also seems to be important to create an inclusive vision not only for students’, but similarly for school staff. Leadership and teachers’ agency are highlighted in this transformational process.

Keywords: cultural diversity, school organization, situational analysis, Portugal

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