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School levels articulation: a relevant task for teachers' work

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Abstract

The decrease of articulation in school levels has been identified as one of the organizational variables that causes difficulties for student achievement (Zabalza, 1998). On the other hand, successful articulation from elementary to secondary programs helps to create a more balanced and cohesive curriculum, but requires continuous and open communication with teachers at all school levels (Lima, 2008).

Portuguese Educational history is full of disarticulation, as curriculum has been declared compulsory, by adding school levels, and somehow maintaining some professional cultures and school visions that impeach curriculum coherence (Pires, 1996). The aim of this study is to understand the purpose of articulation between school levels. Research was conducted at 7 Portuguese Schools associated to the Observatory of School Life. Articulation practice descriptions were used. Among the main findings we conclude that a successful practice of joint curriculum challenges availability of teachers to work together.

Keywords: School levels articulation; work of teachers; descriptions of best practices.



Introduction

The decrease of articulation in school levels has been identified as one of the organizational variables that causes difficulties for student achievement (Zabalza, 1998). On the other hand, successful articulation from elementary to secondary programs helps to create a more balanced and cohesive curriculum, but requires continuous and open communication with teachers at all school levels (Lima, 2008).

Portuguese Educational history is full of disarticulation, as curriculum has been declared compulsory, by adding school levels, and somehow maintaining some professional cultures and school visions that impeach curriculum coherence (Pires, 1996).

In spite of some legal measures coming from the Educational Act (1986) and further policies promoting compulsory school enlargement, School integration, School management and Teacher education and training design, the main goal of which "was to give coherence to the educational system, it is possible to find evidence that shows that articulation of school levels is far from complete. Some of this evidence has been collected by the Education Inspectorate Board (GIE), during its school evaluation processes. Another sign that shows the importance of this issue can be seen in the recent government document, called Basic Education Learning Aims, the major goal of which is to improve articulation among curriculum levels.

Some of the difficulties and constraints that arise from this articulation task are widely studied, particularly those relating to professional and organizational culture (Hargreaves, 2003). In a recent study accomplished by the Observatory of School Life, it was concluded that the professional cultures of teachers and educators shape the way those groups recreate the idea of Basic Education unity and remains the main obstacle as well the main facilitator of grade level articulation.

Further studies by the Observatory of School Life, which we are presenting now, rely on another principle: the purpose is not to identify what fails, but to understand what is actually accomplished in order to recognize the purpose of articulation between school levels. With this shift in analytical axis it is still possible to identify what schools (each school) do to promote articulation related to the impact on the culture of teachers.



Methods

Research was conducted in 7 Portuguese Schools that are associated to the Observatory of School Life. Research methods were qualitative in the way that descriptions of school curriculum articulation were used to collect data.

The schools were asked to what extent they considered and worked on school level articulation.

They were asked how they undertake this issue by sending us a description of their best practices related to the subject. It was suggested, but it was not binding, that each description could refer to the following:

- 1 – school levels where the initiative did take place, its promoters and temporal boundaries.
- 2 – the organizational structure that framed it.
- 3 – successful aspects.

Data came from seven school texts, which were processed by use of content analysis software.



Main Findings

Data allowed for the identification of major trend in school level articulation:

First, good practice is that one that fits completely with diagnosis and decision agents and that which performs where it seems to be most needed. That is to say that it could be related to setting up work agendas or to working on the implementation of curriculum in the classroom.

Secondly, good practice in joint curriculum ensures a coherent curriculum, focusing on curriculum alignment and making it common to the collective subject that put it into practice – this means teachers who will work with each student over time. To extend on the previous reason, good practice of joint curriculum includes valuing the availability of teachers to work together.

Research findings were delivered to schools in order to open a debate that could open a discussion among teachers, in a broad landscape, if those practices challenge the cultures of teachers.



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