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Rethinking Educational Research on School Disengagement Through Students' Voices

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Abstract

Several factors may lead to school disengagement and dropout. Understanding this process can help schools identify and work with young people at risk of disengaging, before this comes entrenched. This paper reports the stages and initial results of a study that used vocational school students as co-researchers to investigate the phenomenon of engagement and disengagement at a vocational school. Following the premises that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling, we have built a research design in which all data were collected, analysed and coded by students who were engaged in a 3-stage process of analysis: selecting, contextualising and codifying. First findings of this research show that by analysing data, students identified and critically discussed problems, naming ways to change the situation, thus showing that when they are asked to participate in their own learning process, change can happen and schools can locally work to reduce dropouts.

Keywords: School dropout; disengagement; students as co-researchers; students voice; photo voice.

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1. Introduction

Dropping out of school is a worldwide phenomenon and it has been thoroughly studied where regular schools are concerned. An involuntary consequence in some educational settings has been to drive poor performing students into seeking education through other alternative settings to increase school achievement test outcomes. These have taken up this challenge to re-engage students in learning, to promote graduation and ultimately to facilitate students' long-term success (Catterall, 2011). However, re-engaging students in learning in alternative educational settings has also proven to be a demanding task, mainly due to the fact that these alternative educational settings in Portugal, like Vocational Education and Training (VET) schools, are seen as second chance schools by the community and, in some cases, by parents and students themselves, instead of been seen as a real alternative for student development and achievement.

Dropping out is more of a process rather than an event. Although it is difficult to demonstrate a causal relationship between any single factor and the decision to quit school, a large number of studies with similar findings suggest two types of factors that predict students' dropout: factors associated with individual characteristics of students, and factors associated with the institutional characteristics of families, school and communities (Hupfeld, 2007). Whatever the case is, no single factor can completely account for a student's decision to engage in or dropout and it may not be simply the result of what happens at school.

Nevertheless, before addressing dropout, we need to better understand the process of disengagement. Disengagement is a phenomenon that has been for the past years the focus of many researchers. It is a complex process that needs to be addressed from an insider perspective for better understanding. Looking into the school context, Smyth (2006) argues that school disengagement is often constructed in terms of deficit and blaming views of students, their families and neighbourhoods, suggesting the need for recuperative activities by the teachers or school to solve the problem. This is what happens in most schools, where a classical teaching-learning environment is established, and where students feel that their only purpose there is to meet and socialise with their friends, banishing learning to a low priority level. Therefore, rather than blaming students or their social background, we need to understand early dropout in terms of the process of disengagement that is developed between students and schools.

The literature shows that the teaching staff, the school's resources, its teaching and general processes and practices taken together make up a school framework that can favour a student to engage or, on the contrary, disengage from school. The disrespect for students' own pedagogical preferences, goals and contributions, demonstrated through boring and sterile learning environments may lead to student disengagement from education (Carrington, Bland, Spooner-Lane & White, E. 2012). In fact, students are often left out of the discourse on student engagement and are traditionally objectified and omitted from this dialogue as they are often configured as the products of formal education systems (Murphy, 2001). Some students even tend to receive the least interesting, most passive forms of instruction and are given the least opportunity to participate actively in their own education, leading from low levels of engagement with their learning to high rates of dropping out (Levin, 2000).

Narrowing this argument to the Portuguese context, when students enrol in a VET course to pursue their learning, they expect to find a different way of learning from those of regular schools. But when VET schools act in a traditional way, transmitting knowledge in the same way to every class and every student, knowing that students have different skills and ways of learning, then the expected engagement from students will most likely fade out.

Some researchers also found that students who were consulted felt more respected as individuals and as a body within the school. They also felt that they belonged and they liked being treated in an adult way. Students at risk of disengaging were found in some cases to 'come back on board' as a result of having their opinions heard and acted upon (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Here, we argue that

young people involved in researching a social practice or a problem that concerns themselves are in a better position to know the 'inside story'. The view from inside a group should be obtained from the inside by using participant observation and analysis. As Denzin (1986) notes, 'the researcher who has not yet penetrated the world of the individuals studied is in no firm position to begin developing predictions, explanations and theories about that world' (p. 39).

Further evidence supporting student voice may lie in the findings of Jean Rudduck, whose work suggests that what students say about teaching and learning is not only worth listening to, but also provides important grounds for conceiving ways of improving schools. Student voice has many benefits to the education system and affords young people the opportunity to talk about what helps and what hinders their learning (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Moreover, some researchers (Fielding, 2001; Holdsworth, 2005) point to the importance of linking student voice with action, arguing that 'authentic' student voice is not simply to provide data for others to make decisions, but that it should encourage young people's active participation in shared decision making and consequent actions. Since students are likely to bring to the surface subtle issues that might go unnoticed otherwise (Messiou, 2014), presenting a framework in which students are not merely subjects, but are seen as researchers allows to penetrate their life and experiences from a perspective that, otherwise, we wouldn't be able to achieve by using traditional methods.

Following the premises of Cook-Sather (2006), that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling and that they should be given the opportunity to actively shape their education, we have built a research design based on the work of Fielding (2001). Fielding has developed a four-fold model that distinguishes between students as sources of data, students as active respondents, students as co-researchers, and students as researchers. This model provides a guideline to reflect on students' involvement in research and the role and responsibilities given to conduct specific tasks. However, as Fielding suggests, initiatives and practices are likely to move in and out of the different modes, and different levels and modes will be appropriate at different times and in different contexts. Our aim was to engage students in such a way that they would tell us about their own experiences, engaging in what Freire (2005) described as one of the first steps from object to subject in their own learning.

This paper presents the participatory methodology and the activities used to address this question focused on students' voices, where they have the key role of co-researchers and are engaged in data collection and its analysis. Our aim was to explore in more detail why students disengage from school from their own perspective.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted at an Education and Training Centre, one of the 23 centres in Portugal created through protocols between the IEPF (Employment and Professional Training Institute) and social partners. These centres have administrative and financial autonomy, providing professional training to young people and adults according to the contents approved by the National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Training, but with a private management. Each of the 23 training centres is oriented for a specific sector – Energy and Communications; Cork; Wood and Furniture; Fishing; Jewelry and Watchmaking; Shoes; to name a few. The Education and Training Centre (ETC) where the study was conducted is oriented to the Building and Construction Industry and it is located in a suburban area in the North of Portugal.

Two classes of two different courses were chosen (administration and construction work) with a total of 30 students ranging from 15 to 25 years old. These courses provide dual certification, which means that at the end of the course these students will have accomplished compulsory education (12th grade in Portugal) and, at the same time, a professional certificate.

The researcher asked the ETC for permission to visit the classes and explained to students the overall purpose and procedures of the research study. A consent form was distributed. For students 18 years or older, consent forms were signed and returned at that time. Parental consent was required for students under 18 years of age.

2.1. Procedures

The study was divided into several steps. This paper will address four of them, those in which students played a role in this research. A first session with the students was held to negotiate with the students their participation in the research as well as to explain the activity they were about to conduct. In the first step of the study, students were asked to answer an online questionnaire. The objective was to know the family, social and academic background of each student. All 30 students answered the questionnaire.

In the second step of the research, the researcher visited the classes again and did a second session to explain photo voice procedures. To make this research a participatory process itself and to engage students in this process, students were asked to answer three questions using Photo Voice methodology. The research questions were addressed by the researcher and given to the students. This means that, as they did not establish the research questions themselves, their role in this research is of co-researchers instead of researchers.

For the third step, a group of nine students was chosen to participate in a group discussion. The group was chosen according to their age, gender and nationality, in an attempt to have a sample that could represent the school. Therefore, there were male and female students, Portuguese students and students with dual nationality, and their age ranged between 16 and 25. In this group discussion, students engaged in a 3-stage process of analysis based on Paulo Freire's (2005) concept of education to promote critical consciousness: selecting, contextualising and codifying.

As step 4, a focus group was held with the objective of discussing in more detail some of the aspects that arose in step 3. Steps 3 and 4 were videotaped with the permission of students and transcribed.

2.1.1. Step 1: Getting to know students background

In the first activity, the questionnaire, one of the first things noticed was the reluctance of students to conduct such a task. Some of their questions were related to assessment and being heard:

'Will we get a grade for this?'

'Why should we bother? No one has ever listened to us before.'

'No one is going to do anything about it.' (By 'it', the student was referring to improvement suggestions they could make in the process).

The disbelief and lack of motivation was notorious. The question on assessment clearly showed they were not used to being questioned about their opinion.

When the researcher asked if they had questions, some students shrugged their shoulders while others silently nodded. One of the students asked: *If there's no grade, we are not obliged to do it, right?* This particular comment initiated an argument between this student and a female student about the pros and cons of participating in the research. The girl was remarkably angry with her colleague, saying *'If everyone thought the way you do, we would never get anywhere!'* A few agreed that it would be a good opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas. Nevertheless, they answered the questionnaire in a computer lab at the centre.

2.1.2. Step 2: The use of photo voice

Photo voice is based on the principles that images teach, pictures can influence policy and citizens ought to participate in imaging and defining public policy. It is a participatory research strategy known for its accuracy in gathering information (Wang, 1999). Participants use photography and stories about their photos to identify and represent issues of importance to them, which enables researchers to have a greater understanding of the issue under study from their perspective (Palibroda, Krieg, Murdock & Havelock, 2009). These aforementioned authors state that through photo voice, marginalised community members are empowered to share their words and photographs as a way to reach decision-makers and implement positive change in their home communities. They are able to have their voices heard and bring forth ideas to influence the decision that affects their lives.

Moreover, visual methods could help disrupt from traditional communicative methods by providing an alternative space for students to speak and interact. The visual narrative methods offer a way of understanding participation (or non-participation) in education from the perspective of a student, using photo elicitation to provoke a reflection on 'previously taken-for-granted assumptions' (Carrington, Allen & Osmolowski, 2007) and loosely allowing students to explain the narrative behind each photo.

It is never easy to explain to teenagers how photographs and narratives may be used to reach decision makers. However, photography was a more engaging activity for them and once they were told they could use their own mobile phones to accomplish it, the reluctance felt in the first phase vanished. They were then given three questions to answer using photo voice methodology. The questions were:

- What keeps you engaged (or not) at school to pursue your studies?
- What would you do if you could participate in the school's decision making?
- Within your community, what keeps you engaged (or not) to pursue your studies?

This step relates to Freire's (2005) first-stage process of analysis – Selecting – since the students chose what to photograph and, by having done so, they have defined the course of discussion. When Paulo Freire developed this methodology, he was working with illiterate people. According to him, 'the tradition has been not to work with the student, but to work on him, imposing an order to which he has to accommodate (p.33)', setting dialogue as essential to affirm students as Subjects of their learning instead of reducing them to the role of Objects. The same way Freire's group of students selected the words with the greatest emotional content and existential meaning, as well as words and expressions linked to the experience of the group to be used in a literacy programme, the students of our research selected images from their daily life to answer the research questions and took photos to illustrate and express what they meant.

In this activity – which lasted a month – students collected photos using mobile devices to answer the questions and made written comments on each one of them. While the activity was still ongoing, we came across with some of the students who said – '*I have already taken two photos. Do you want to see them?*', seeming cheerful.

Some teachers said they asked to take pictures of them to include in the project and a language teacher said some students had asked her to correct spelling. She said she refused it claiming that they should present their ideas as true and real as possible, even if it meant to present it with spelling or grammar mistakes. It was notorious their engagement in the activity. They were given total freedom to conduct this activity and at no time did the researcher intervene in the data gathering process. Students then sent all the material gathered to the researcher.

2.1.3. Step 3: participatory analysis

Contextualising is the second stage of Freire's process of analysis, in which the students define the meaning of their photographs during a group discussion. They identify the problem or the asset, critically discuss the roots of the situation and name ways to change the situation.

The nine selected students engaged in the analysis of the data collected, engaging students to think critically, leading us to gain a different insight by having the subjects of the study analyse and discuss the data they have collected. The students were between 15 and 25 years of age, two of the students had dual nationality and five of them had already worked or were working part-time at the time of the group discussion.

The session was held in a normal classroom. When students arrived, they decided to rearrange the room and gathered around some tables. The researcher handed them all the photos collected and they spread them on the tables. They started discussing how they would divide the photos, by themes or by questions, and reached the conclusion that they should divide them into three, according to the questions asked. They started separating the photos and putting them in the place they thought would best answer that question. After having the photos in the right place, they decided to begin with the first question, observe the photos and read the comments written. They reached the conclusion that each question should be subdivided according to the themes arising from the photos.

How do we do it?, asked one of the students. *Let's split what's engaging and disengaging, problems and solutions, and so on*, said another. At this point, students began putting up themselves some questions:

- *What do you see here?*
- *What did you find?*
- *How many parts can we divide this in? four? No, five?*

At this point, several students were speaking at the same time. They started discussing so many issues that one student decided to go to the whiteboard and make a chart with what the other students were saying. At any time did the researcher intervene in the process?



Figure 1. Students engaging in participatory analysis (step 3)

The students engaged in the discussion in such a way that they forgot that they were being recorded and laughed and joked, commented on the things they were seeing and reading, began telling personal experiences and debated solutions for some of the problems featured.

We present here one of the charts made by the students (our translation). In one of the other charts students counted and numbered the times that each engaging and disengaging situation was pictured.

Table 1. Question: What would you do if you could participate in the development of your school?

| Problem | Proposal |
|--|--|
| Students behaviours | |
| Lack of maintenance of students lounge | Put vending machines in the workshops |
| No vending machines by the workshops | Change the schedule so that all students can attend it |
| School cafeteria schedule | Community service to students who pollute the school |
| Pollution | More sports classes; improve the football pitch; increase the gym and allow students to attend it; being allowed to swim in the pool |
| Lack of physical exercise | Have more days to schedule the meals in the platform |
| Scheduling the lunch | Have trainees do some of the works that need to be done |
| The amount of food served at lunch | More chairs and tables outside |
| Water infiltration in the classrooms | Have something more attractive on the corridors |
| Classroom cleaning | Change the floor of the building (slippery) |
| More issues that arose from the students' discussion | Change the entrance pathway |
| | Update and have more computers at the school library |
| | Improve the organisation of the administrative staff |

Freire (2005) stated that 'dialogue creates a critical attitude' and as men apprehend a phenomenon or a problem, they also apprehend its casual links. The more accurately men grasp causality, the more critical their understanding of reality will be (p. 39). Following this premise, students unconsciously began the third stage of Freire's process of analysis, Codifying, in which students identify the issues, themes or theories that emerge, write down their stories and thoughts and become narrators of the process themselves. Here, they not only identified the problems arising from the photos, but also told personal experiences and discussed possible solutions that, according to their point of view, would be easy to put into practice.

At the end of the session, when we were no longer recording, some students said that they had never thought they would like this activity so much. And they continued, saying that if they were asked more often about their opinion, the school would improve and they would come to school with more enthusiasm just because they knew someone was listening to them. After listening to that, one cannot help thinking that when students are given the power to decide the kind of school they want or the kind of learning experience they want to have, they increase their self-confidence and their willingness to do more and do better. After being so reluctant and reserved in the beginning, they felt empowered by the experience gained and were able to speak openly with the researcher.

2.1.4. Step 4: focus group

After transcribing the session with the students, there was a need to talk to the same students again to clarify some questions that emerged. The students were then called for a focus group discussion. Five of the questions concerned things they had discussed previously in the other session and three were about their own disengagement experience. Students felt more at ease and debated the first five questions with enthusiasm. One noticed that they had talked about the questions among themselves outside the school sphere and even suggested more improvement measures and solutions for the problems they had debated. When we came to the questions about their own disengagement process, first there was a silence and then one of the students started talking. Their enthusiasm with this particular question decreased, which appears to suggest that they were not very keen on speaking

about themselves. Although they all spoke about their disengagement process and dropouts, they managed to draw the attention to other situations rather than their own in the middle of their speech or not to speak openly about some things.

– *I have been through some situations which were not good. (...) then I went through other situations in another school, but I opened my eyes.* The student never said what those situations were.

One of the things noticed in the data students collected, and in their analysis, is that no one had mentioned the activities inside the classroom. They mentioned teachers' performance and assured to point out the good qualities of their teachers, but neither the methodology nor the activities conducted were approached. We wanted to know why, but again they started by avoiding the question saying, for example, *I think we don't have much to say about that. But the classrooms need to change or Probably because we are OK like that, otherwise we would....* The student never finished the sentence.

Then, they began expressing some things that could be done to change and improve the way they are learning and being taught, suggesting a change in the course curriculum and strategies that teachers could use in the classroom. There is no doubt that changing the course curriculum is a difficult issue because it is not the school's responsibility. However, if students know how they want to learn and how they learn best, why can't we integrate their will and personal preferences in their learning process, instead of just asking them to adapt to the one that is presented to them?

3. Discussion and Conclusions

1. Whether disengagement is triggered by institutional, individual or community factors or by peer pressure, it all comes down to what students think, feel and need. Academic progress and success depend on this. Students know their learning needs and problems and are in the best position to tell the school what to learn and how to learn it. Therefore, the first and best approach would be listening to what they have to say. It is our understanding that if we were to conduct a research on disengagement and dropout from school, students should be involved and participate actively. Therefore, building a research design focused on students' voices and having them as co-researchers can not only provide an inner insight of this phenomena in schools, but may also illustrate the potential of such approaches in future research.
2. This study suggests that involving students in their learning and in the school activities may enhance students' empowerment. Today, students are consumers of education and, therefore, they should be listened to when their learning is on the line. Allowing them to make decisions is one of the best ways to empower them. Such participatory activities that allow students to speak about their problems and disengaging learning tasks are empowering and should be included in any school as part of the teaching/learning process. However, student empowerment is not a one-party thing. Partnership between students and the school requires mutual support, working together and control, both having a voice (Mok, 1997). Without partnership, student empowerment in the school setting is impossible.
3. In our view, what is needed to engage students is not necessarily learning that is fun, but learning over which they have a sense of ownership, that empowers them to make a difference in their lives, connecting with the students' cultural knowledge and accounting for their histories and experiences. Such engagement is an empowering one and develops a sense of entitlement, belonging and identification. Otherwise, students are 'doing time, not doing education' (Sefa Dei, 2003).

We believe that the research design presented here, although presented as a step-by-step approach, offers the flexibility to researchers to adapt each of the steps to better suit their research and its context, as well as the subjects of the research. It is time to break away from traditional patterns of both educational provision and thinking. It is time not only to hear the student voice, but to listen to it and, furthermore, act upon it (Hopkins, 2008) for the real education reform to take place. The next step of this research will be to work with the VET school and help them integrate students'

voices in the decision-making process. Student participation in the school organisation is an indispensable element to ensure successful achievement of its aim. Although it may be a challenge for schools, focusing more strongly on the issues of engagement and disengagement from the students' point of view and integrating them in the schools, decisions will orientate schools towards a more inclusive pedagogy. After all, aren't students the leading actors in the education system?

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