LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSION: PERSPECTIVES FROM PORTUGUESE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Abstract

Schools in various parts of the world still have in their agendas the improvement of the quality of school processes and students' learning. Inclusion is one of the main schools' concern as inclusive education remain as one of the essential goals of political agendas and educational reforms internationally. For effective inclusion, it is necessary for schools to have leaderships oriented by inclusive values. Previous literature highlights the role of leadership perspectives about inclusion as a determinant of inclusive practices. Specific studies identify a set of characteristics of what should be an inclusive leader for supporting more inclusive communities. The general objective of the research presented here was to explore the perspective of three Portuguese school principals about diversity, inclusion and inclusive leadership. This study adopted a methodology of a qualitative nature. The data was collected with a semi-structured interview related to inclusive education and inclusive leadership. Three major themes were considered being them inclusive school, inclusive leader and inclusive practices. Results support the idea that school leaders are inclusive oriented even though they recognize difficulties in the operationalization of inclusive practices. Therefore, the conclusions pointed to the need to continue working for the development of more inclusive schools taking into account the leadership role in this endeavor.

Keywords: Leadership, inclusion, education.

In the last decades, inclusive education has gained particular attention as a human right (UNESCO, 2009). Both in policy and research arenas, equity, social justice, and inclusion remains as essential topics of analyses and reflection for societal and educational improvements (OECD 2015; UNESCO 2017). As a human right related to education quality for all students, schools need to maximize students' presence, participation, and progress (Moya, 2019). Research contributions support the need to improve policies and practices to gain access, participation and effective learning for all students (Azorín & Ainscow, 2018; Moya, 2019). Therefore, inclusive education is a whole school and community process. Political vision, school culture, and inclusive practices are important dimensions of inclusion that require inclusive learning communities, teaching methodologies based on cooperative work and diverse resources (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Moya, 2019). It is essential for schools to establish a shared understanding of inclusion and of the process necessary to make it possible (Azorín & Ainscow, 2018). School leaders have an essential role in this endeavor.

Societal priorities around social justice and the educational reforms in different countries (Portuguese law of inclusive education included) have had an important impact on the concept and practice of leadership in schools. Despite the unquestionable value of school leadership as influencing others to reach a shared vision, the nature and action of schools leaders remain complex and multidimensional (Angelides, 2011; Ekins, 2017). Of fluid, contextual and dynamic nature, leadership for inclusive schools results upon four distinct domains, contextual, socio-cultural, leadership and pedagogical domains (Ruairc, Ottesen & Precey, 2013). Essential characteristics in inclusive leadership are a school vision aligned with pro inclusive values and the awareness about what needs to be taken in the journey of becoming more inclusive (Azorín & Ainscow, 2018).

A shared vision whereby to work on for inclusive education, makes leaders to continuously question beliefs, assumptions and practices (Ainscow, Both & Dyson, 2006) “or at least empower others, within the school to challenge practices, in a move towards fostering new meanings about diversity, promoting new and different inclusive practices and building links between schools and communities” (Ekins, 2017, p.85). Being committed to inclusive values and encourage inclusive practices are building blocks for inclusive leadership (Jones, Forlin & Gillies, 2013). Some authors suggest leadership in inclusive schools are much more of transformational and transformative leaders with focus on participatory processes of change due to a shared vision for inclusion (Angelides, 2011;
Ottesen, 2013). Specifically, inclusive leaders engage in institutional norms, develop a schoolwide plan for inclusive practice, make meaning and purpose, align structures with purpose, support learning, plan for teacher capacity and professional development and sustain a commitment to risk, innovation, and learning (Black & Simon, 2014). This whole school approach for inclusion, based on students participation, active engagement of teachers and community compromise, make school leaders take a transformational and transformative action. In this complex challenge, school leaders need to be supported by policy and research contributions.

This paper explores the perspective of school principals about diversity, inclusion and inclusive leadership. At present, Portugal is working on important changes in the educational system, enacting a clear legal framework for the inclusion of all students, attending diversity. These critical political changes are challenging schools and communities to change their views and practices. School leaders have an essential role in supporting this change. It is necessary to understand leaders views and practices related to inclusive education.

1 METHODOLOGY

1.1 Aim of the study

The overall aim of this research was to explore the perspective of three Portuguese school principals about diversity, inclusion and inclusive leadership. Specifically, we aimed to identify school leaders views and practices related to inclusive education. This study adopted a methodology of a qualitative nature.

1.2 Participants and procedures

The study was conducted with a sample of three Portuguese principals that were selected as a convenience sample. Participants were invited to participate. No compensation was provided, and participants were guaranteed full confidentiality. Data were collected between June 2018 and July 2018. Sample demographic characteristics are presented in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Type of school</th>
<th>Experience as a teacher</th>
<th>Experience as principal</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Private school</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Public school</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.3 Instrument

The data was collected with a semi-structured interview related to inclusive education and inclusive leadership. Three major themes were considered, being them inclusive school, inclusive leadership, and inclusive practices.

1.4 Data analysis

The answers were analyzed using content analyses procedures with the support of Nvivo, version 12. For the analyses, the next three dimensions were considered: (1) Inclusive education; (2) Inclusive leadership and; (3) Inclusive practices. Categories emerged from answers.

2 RESULTS

2.1 Inclusive education

Participants defined inclusive education as education for all students so that all students are valued in their difference, all students have opportunities to participate in school daily life activities, and all students can learn.
Celebration of diversity. The school principals referred that an inclusive school accepts differences and value diversity as an opportunity and a challenge.

*Diversity is richness (…) including all, we are including life itself. Because life is this, it is different people (…) (P2).*

Participation. Students participation in daily activities and in decision-making processes were identified as indicators of inclusive education by participants.

*We listen to students in that to question aspects related to school life, precisely, to understand what they feel, or what they think it is not good and can be changed. (P1)*

*To make them feel, most possible, in real moments, of real experiences and bring more from everyone. (P2)*

Learning. Learning opportunities that schools and teachers organize for all students are one of the indicators of inclusive education referred by the participants.

*Give opportunity for all, in their capabilities, to accomplish the maximum, their maximum potential (P1).*

2.2 Inclusive leaders

School principals have distinguished levels of leadership (e.g., top leaders and intermediate leaders), and they have also referred teachers as classroom leaders. Commitment to inclusion values, solution-oriented actions, teachers involvement and families participation encouragement were identified as relevant to top leaders. Teachers as classroom leaders refer to teachers classroom management and pedagogical practices. Participants mentioned characteristics above as intentions or best practices, recognizing challenges associated.

Inclusive vision. Participants have mentioned that school principals need to accept, respect and value diversity and prevent possible forms of exclusion and discrimination.

*An inclusive leader is the one that advocates with nails and teeth’s¹ students that, in fact, need support more than others. (P3)*

Solution-oriented. One of the participants referred that school principals need to be solution-oriented, focusing on challenges and responses to barriers. Additionally, participants mentioned specific actions that need to be taken to support all student’s needs.

*The inclusive leader is the one that goes far with resources; thus, defend his lady¹, accept his students, in certain, accept children and goes far from what is given by central administration. He cannot wait for central administration. He is plotted. If an inclusive leader awaits that central administration solves the problem, it is better to go to other places. (P3)*

Teachers involvement. School principals referred to teachers involvement and participation as a task that needs to be taken by inclusive leaders.

*I think, think that it is a path that I have to make, together, me and teachers, making us, of taking the necessary steps to make our school a more inclusive school. (P1)*

Family participation. Encourage families participation in schools life was one of the inclusive leaders task, identified by participants.

*And then I have feedback, you know by who? From parents. For me, this feedback is really important, I mean, if things are running good or running bad… And sometimes, things are running bad. (P3)*

Classroom management. Participants also referred teachers as classroom leaders by the way they manage lessons and motivate students.

*A teacher must be forcibly a leader in the classroom. A teacher must have the capability of managing his classroom and taking the more efficient measures, to be a person that*

¹ Portuguese expression to reinforce the idea of defense.
knows to adapt to the context, mostly, he needs to constantly deal with unpredictable things, know as deeply his students and goes with them. (P2)

2.3 Inclusive practices

Considering inclusive practices, participants have mentioned pedagogical options, organizational principles, and whole school involvement. Participants identified practices being implemented in their schools and also related difficulties and challenges.

Organization by and for diversity. School principals referred to a whole school approach to diversity so that organizational decisions depend on students and context.

The way how we organize ourselves... the organizational model, the way we think timetables... breaks... activities that we organize depends, precisely, of students needs. (P1)

Open and flexible curricular management. Activities management is flexible and open to students needs over the school year.

The annual plan of activities is open, is flexible, we have to create mechanisms, strategies, activities to serve that specific class and, as possible, deal to prevent. (P2)

Diverse learning opportunities. Participants identified diverse learning opportunities for all students and, as possible, working together in the classroom.

Our policy is in the classroom, most possible. It was what I was saying before. Children must be in the context, the most regular possible, with similar experiences to peers, to live school most possible... feel the school. (P2)

Professional development opportunities. School principals referred the importance of professional development opportunities as a necessary activity to prepare teachers for attending diversity.

We also need to develop actions for teachers, and I think that professional development and training must be a deep bet for schools. (P2)

Families involvement. Participants also referred activities to improve parents participation and involvement.

Bring parents, more and more, to school, being informed, understand what means diversity, respect for others, what is this, in fact, of an inclusive school. Bring to all as a whole. (P2)

3 CONCLUSIONS

This paper explored the perspective of three Portuguese school principals about inclusive education, inclusive leadership, and inclusive practices. Results support the idea that school leaders are inclusive oriented even though they recognize the challenges of inclusive leadership and the difficulties in the operationalization of inclusive practices.

School principals understand and agree upon the inclusive education concept. Our results seem to point to the principals’ commitment to diversity, inclusion and social justice. Inclusive education is defined as providing high-quality education for all, considering participation and learning. This collective process, based on participation and commitment to inclusion, is vital to make schools more inclusive (Angelides, 2011). Leaders vision about school guide leaders action as it influence teachers and community involvement.

The results also acknowledge a whole school approach to diversity integrating different levels and dimensions of leadership actions for inclusion. School leaders need to accomplish contextual, socio-cultural, leadership and pedagogical aspects when planning for improvement (Ruairc, Ottesen & Precey, 2013). Kozleski et al. (2015) identified the capacity building as a critical skill of school leaders as "for the schools to effectively implement inclusive practices, leaders purposefully developed and built relationships among school staff, administrative capacities, and district networking capacities" (p.218). As mentioned by study participants, inclusive vision, solution-oriented approach and others’ participation in school life are essential characteristics of inclusive settings (Kozleski et al., 2015). The contextualized, multidimensional and participative nature of inclusive leadership emerge from the
results. Patterns of leadership that support inclusion are not static. Instead, it varies with and to influence and change the school culture (Angelides, 2011).

Support and empower others seems to be one of the crucial tasks for inclusive leaders. This study results point to the school principals as transformational leaders as they should clear visions and goals, inspire others, stimulate engagement, offer support and develop structures and conditions (Ekins, 2017). The dynamic and contextual nature of a solution-oriented action, the open and flexible curricular management and the school organization by and for diversity identified in participants answers allude to a transformational view of inclusive leaders.

These study results suggest that make schools more inclusive is challenging for leaders. A clear comprehension and vision of inclusion, a focus, and solution-oriented action, a relational and democratic position to others and a persistent and resilient attitude seem to be relevant characteristics of inclusive leaders. Therefore, the conclusions pointed to the need to continue working for the development of more inclusive schools taking into account the leadership role in this endeavor. Educational policies need to consider school principals views and practices as an indicator for decision making in leaders training and professional support.

REFERENCES