Full length article

Learning and inclusivity via Interactive Groups in early childhood education and care in the Hope school, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Access to high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), particularly for disadvantaged children, is critical to ensuring that future learning is more effective and more likely to continue throughout life. A wealth of research has provided extensive information about the key factors that impact the quality of ECEC and improve cognitive and social outcomes. Despite the European priority to make high-quality ECEC available to all children, accomplishing this goal remains a challenge. The present article discusses a specific type of inclusive classroom organisation called Interactive Groups (IGs). IGs were studied in the preschool classrooms of an urban school located in a disadvantaged area of Spain that has high levels of unemployment, poverty and marginalisation. Empirical data from interviews with teachers, daily life stories from mothers and children, and classroom observations shed light on the perceptions of the potential of this particular classroom setting, where children are placed in small, mixed-ability groups coordinated by one volunteer from the community, to benefit children and promote their cognitive, social and emotional development. The findings suggest that this particular form of inclusive classroom organisation can reach children from a minority background while providing high-quality ECEC.

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1. Introduction

School failure is a problem that OECD countries are addressing—through policies that are designed to reduce failures and improve equity in education—because reducing school failure can be a key factor in social development and economic growth (OECD, 2012). Educational research has demonstrated that if solid foundations are laid in the early years, later learning is more effective and more likely to continue throughout life (Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov, 2005; Elffers, 2012). Therefore, education is a powerful tool during the very early stages of life, particularly if quality early childhood education is provided to all students (OECD, 2012). Several studies (Belfield & Levin, 2007) indicate that investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is even more beneficial for socially disadvantaged children including migrants, ethnic minorities and those living in poverty. It helps to close the achievement gap and reduce the costs to society of lost talent and public spending on social, health and justice systems (Levin, 2009; Wößmann & Schüetz, 2006). In particular, Roma children would benefit from high-quality ECEC, as it

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constitutes one of the five models of intervention for achieving inclusive education established by the Roma Education Fund (2015). Therefore, the key role of high-quality ECEC programmes in reducing school failure is particularly important for disadvantaged children, for whom the vicious cycle of failure and exclusion is repeated from one generation to the next (García, Girbés, & Gómez, 2015).

The recommendations of the European Commission (2011a, 2011b) to the Member States about early childhood education and care build on this evidence. There seems to be a consensus regarding the importance of increasing children's access to ECEC, but the most relevant point of agreement is that 'access is not enough'; rather, it is quality that can actually make a difference. Interventions in the early years that provide such high-quality education are those, which aim to achieve efficiency and equity for all. In particular, this concept suggests that ECEC should be "designed and delivered to meet all children's full range of needs, cognitive, emotional, social and physical" (European Commission, 2011a, p. 6). In this context, evaluating the quality of ECEC is increasingly important and educational research can contribute to determining which programmes boost and sustain children's achievement outcomes over time (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014).

In seeking to identify the classroom interventions that may provide high-quality ECEC and make ECEC available to all children, this article draws on the analysis of one Successful Educational Action. Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) were analysed by the INCLUD-ED Project,[2] which aimed to identify practices that address the issues of school failure and student dropout in Europe. These actions are founded on dialogic learning and, based on this concept, they have been successful in engaging families and communities in school spaces (Flecha, 2015). Using the communicative methodology of research (Gómez, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2011), these successful actions were identified by analysing 27 case studies of successful schools that serve families with low socioeconomic status and migrant or minority backgrounds across the European Union (Elboj, 2015).

SEAs are not merely good practices that have shown good results in specific contexts; rather they have led to the best results in many diverse contexts, achieving positive progress both academically and socially, without additional resources, by using existing resources in the school and the community more efficiently. Essential to SEAs is the scientific evidence on which they are built and that results in two fundamental characteristics that differentiates them from any other school practice. SEAs are universal and transferable to different contexts that achieve increased academic performance and improved social relations at school. Interactive Groups (IGs) are one of the SEAs identified by the INCLUD-ED project and are characterised by two main features: 1) the organisation of students into heterogeneous groups and 2) the reorganisation of human resources to manage student diversity within shared learning environments (Flecha, 2015). IGs are based on the idea that it is important to enrich the communicative processes in learning environments by increasing and diversifying learning interactions. To accomplish this, heterogeneous groups of pupils are created and a volunteer adult is assigned to each group to encourage peer interaction around the learning activity (García et al., 2015).

The present article focuses on an exploration of IGs in the preschool classrooms of children aged 3, 4 and 5 in Hope school in Spain, and analyses the potential of IGs to improve education for minority groups. The school selected for this study is an example of a school which experienced an important process of transformation—from a ghetto to a magnet school—and which has improved both academic achievement and social cohesion (Díez-Palomar, Santos-Pitanga, & Álvarez-Cifuentes, 2013). Flecha and Soler (2013) outline some demographic details about Hope school and its social context: the school is located in a very deprived area of the Spanish city of Albacete, where residents face hard living conditions and have high rates of unemployment. Ninety percent of the population in the neighbourhood is Roma and almost 50% of them have had only basic education. The rate of illiteracy among adults is approximately 25%. Hope school used to serve children from minority backgrounds, most of them Roma, from ages 3 to 12 (i.e., preschool and primary education) until they started offering secondary education in 2008. Before 2006, when the school was transformed into a learning community, the educational context was one of school failure, with 36% of students not achieving minimum academic standards and truancy rates of 74% (Díez-Palomar et al., 2013). Furthermore, the neighbourhood is geographically marginalised by a highway that separates it from the rest of the city. Social marginalisation is also strong and the population living there includes vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities—primarily Roma—and immigrant populations that live in poverty and suffer from unemployment, low educational levels (Flecha & Soler, 2013) and deprived health conditions largely due to poverty (Brown, Gómez, & Munté, 2013). The Roma population is one of the most disadvantaged minority groups in Spain and beyond, and the challenges that Roma children encounter in the educational system are considerable (OECD, 2012). However, in Hope some of these challenges are perceived as being tackled.

The present article is divided into four main sections. First, contextual research on the contributions of high-quality ECEC is presented. Second, the methodology used to conduct the case study is described, followed by the data analysis and the implementation of IGs in ECEC in Hope school. Then, the results are presented detailing the perception of the research participants of positive outcomes by IGs on the academic performance of the children in ECEC at Hope school as well as on children's social and emotional development. To conclude the article, the main ideas of the results are discussed.

2. Relevance of high-quality ECEC

Education during the early years provides the best opportunity for investment in human capital due to its impact on later opportunities during schooling at the primary and secondary levels (Cunha et al., 2005). Many researchers in different countries