

# Education and attachment: dropping out school failure

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**Abstract**—The Core role of this research work is to identify and reflect on explanatory factors of academic success at school. This study<sup>a1</sup> is being carried out with students attending an educational offer called "Alternative Curricular Course - PCA". It is a differentiated curriculum that promotes the learning of basic skills, specifically in Portuguese language and Mathematics, facilitating logical reasoning, artistic, vocational and professional development. Its main goal is the fulfillment of compulsory schooling and combat school failure. The purpose of this study is to analyze the following variables: dynamic internal models of attachment, teacher-student relationship and school performance in students with alternative curricular pathways. This is a cross-sectional and quantitative study, which will use the Scales IVIA - Inventory on Childhood and Adolescent Attachment and IPPA - Teacher Relation Scale, whose scientific validity will be enhanced by its application to a representative sample of public schools in Autonomous Region of Madeira (Portugal) with the aim of examining if the dynamic internal model and the teacher-student relationship influence school achievement. Data analysis will be performed through the SPSS program (version 23)

**Keywords**— *alternative Curricular Pathways, dynamic internal models of attachment, teacher-student relationship, school performance, school dropout.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2017, I had the opportunity of undergoing a professional experience in Madeira within the local school system concerning a particular public: youngsters risking dropping out. Confronting myself with that specific context and having to deal with multiple factors, realities and actors, has set the basis and main reasons for carrying out this research.

The Educational psychology lenses and more specifically the attachment theory, have thus fundamended the ground to explore that given reality.

In the current societies, accomplishing a high school diploma is an important developmental task tracing the transition from adolescence into adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

School completion is a major event in the academic, personal and professional life of an individual. Achieving school is the culmination of a process of learning, developing competencies and realizations. Whilst withdrawal stands for the negative opposite. (Gamier, Stein, and Jacobs, 1997). The dropping out factor represents a still significant percentage of students in Portugal and in Madeira specifically (Pordata,

2016). In fact, school dropout has drawn the attention of national policy makers, given that it is a development event, an element that can lead to severe social issues such as unemployment, substance abuse and eventually crime (Finn, 1989 Jimerson, 1999).

According to Sil (2004), the episodes of repetition and early abandonment of the educational system are situations that demonstrate how the academic failure of students is institutionally revealed, both episodes translating students' maladaptation to the standards of the educational curricula.

According to data published in 2016 by the European Commission, the rate of school in Portugal ranks fourth withdrawal in comparison with other European countries considered (Pordata, 2016). This has triggered concern on the part of the various organizations and actors involved in the educational context in Portugal. Europe's 2020 strategy sets the target of 'reducing the share of early leavers of education and training to less than 10%. In 2016, Portugal, rated 14% (Pordata, 2016), causing education decisors to develop emergency strategies to achieve European goal.

Benavente et al. (1994) and Sil (2004) argue that several dimensions should be considered in this analysis, such as cultural and family factors or the educational system itself.

Academic success or failure occurs within the teaching-learning process and may reflect the impacts of innumerable internal or external aspects, such as personality, cognitive, emotional, teacher - student relationship, peer's relationship, family structure and school as an institute among other aspects (Pereira, 2015).

At school, a comprehensive approach of tackling low educational accomplishment should include measures that are appropriate for all students, integrating underachieving students in specific; it should also comprise measures both inside and outside the "normal" classroom. Evidence shows that taking into consideration students' educational needs in terms of willingness to learn, interest, and individual education profiles has a positive influence on engagement and accomplishment (Tieso, 2001, 2005; Lawrence-Brown, 2004).

Motivational aspects must also be taken into account. Teachers are required to set and encourage the involvement of all students (Hambrick, 2005). Teachers and staff dealing with juvenile publics, as well as significant adults in the lives of children / young people, can establish important connections (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Riley, 2010), more specifically to those who suffered traumas during the developmental period, ending up without the right "tools" for the stage of schooling. Providing positive educational experiences to those children

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<sup>1</sup> As i am writing this project-paper the data analysis hasn't yet been performed. It will nevertheless have been when presented and discussed at the International "Conference on Applied Psychology and Human Behaviour"

not only leads to improved learning and cognitive development but also to emotional, social and resilience growth (Bombèr, 2007). For Bombèr (2011), supportive practice and the quality of the relationship reinforces the successful education of all children, especially children who are socially and emotionally disadvantaged by early negative parenting experiences. In addition, teachers are increasingly familiar with students who demonstrate social, emotional and behavioural difficulties that ultimately impact their academic performance.

The implications of challenging student behaviour to teachers are an increasingly serious problem. Labels such as "at-risk," "vulnerable," "undisciplined " and "disruptive" (Bombèr, 2011), are often heard in school meetings, In the specific case of the sample that will be used for this study, the above mentioned "tags" constitute for the students a stigma very well known.

The "Alternative Curricula Paths" (PCA) establishes a training program that provides alternative curricular responses adapted to the diversity of situation which have proven inadequate in regular education, when considering the dropping out learners. These curricula are designed to deal with and contribute to solving the problem of repetition and academic failure, avoiding the extension and replication of problematic cases. They are composed of a range of general and specific training subjects that enable the acquisition of knowledge and the promotion of skills in the technological, scientific, artistic and sports fields (Decreto-Lei n.º 3/2008, de 7 de Janeiro, art.º 18, ponto 1, p. 158).

This measure is intended for specific groups of school students, aged up to 15 years, who have the following requirements: a) repeated academic failure; b) discrimination; c) risk of social exclusion or dropping out of school; and d) high demotivation and abstention (Despacho Normativo n.º 1/2006 ).

Within a group of PCA, the task of the teacher/trainer, is multifaceted, requiring adaptive and creative skills to face challenges for more "unexpected" situations, creation of a positive learning environment and citizenship, as previously mentioned, since these classes are made up of students who experience school and social burden. In this same line of reasoning, it is considered relevant to support young people who are at risk, in the search for alternative training that enables them to lead a dignified life and to feel useful from a social perspective (Leite, 2009).

#### CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION OF ATTACHMENT

Lately the conceptual framework of attachment has attracted a more particular attention from researchers in the field of Pedagogy, making it possible to understand how relationships are established, what modifies and influences them, how they are expressed and to what repercussions they lead throughout life (Canavarro, 2006).

The attachment framework has been a very relevant referential for a view of the motivational processes that lead to

non-collaboration and non-identification, as a consequent to school dropout (Finn 1989).

In addition, the attachment theory provides greater clarity to the significance and implications of the behaviour of students under emotional and social strain, thus empowering teachers as well as other educational actors to integrate them into the teaching strategies (Bombèr, 2011).

The attachment relationship is defined as a deep emotional connection between the child and a significant figure, in which both opt for an attitude that contributes to physical and affective closeness in order to allow adequate development (Berman & Sperling, 1994) and tends to continue throughout life (Ainsworth, 1972; Bowlby, 1969).

Internal working models as the individual's representations about the self (encompassing the conceptions of personal and social competences), others (of their availability and support), and the world, are the result of the attachment experiences (Bowlby, 1969, 1988).

Through the formation of secure attachments with significant figure, children develop a healthy internal working model. Children with secure attachment improve the skills required to control their emotions and regulate their impulses (Grossmann et al., 2008), Contrarily those with insecure attachment have difficulties with emotional control and impulse regulation (van der Kolk & Fislser, 1994), acting on instant rewards at the cost of long-term goals (Gailliot, Mead, & Baumeister, 2008). This capacity definitely spawns impulse control and regulation, self-monitoring, and the skill of self-agency (Fonagy, Steele, Moran, Steele, & Higgitt, 1991a).

#### TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Given the neuronal plasticity (adaptive capacities of the central nervous system to alter its own structural system and activity) of the brain, the child / youth is able to adapt in response to new experiences in the right environment, so there is ability for change (Gopnik, 2009, Greenfield, 2001). Children who have failed to secure bonds with their significant figures, may later develop significant ones with their teachers (Bombèr, 2011).

Ultimately, Bowlby (1984), emphasizes the importance of creating an emotional, stable and irreplaceable attachment with a bonding figure, from which the child conceives knowledge and perspectives about himself, the caring figure, the others and the world. This link is thus a forerunner of later (dis) adaptive developmental scripts, in relation to the subject's new contexts and contacts (Cummings, Davies & Campbell, 2000).

Following Vygotsky studies (1978), Pianta (1999) points out that instruction happens in a relational context. On this wise, enabling the learning process along with the teacher, a student recognizes how to behave in a relationship and respond to teacher stimuli. In this perspective, the teaching is clearly bidirectional (Marcus, & Sanders-Reio, 2001).

The teacher-student relationship is one of the main features of the student's learning process and may either act as a facilitator or as an obstacle. Some authors recommend that the improvement of relations between teachers and pupils can be a decisive and less costly course to optimize the success of

students (Lopes & Silva, 2010). The relationship between teacher and student can even play a significant role as a protective factor for young people experiencing school distress, family crises or at risk (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Kennedy, 2008).

The quality of this attachment, along with the relationship with the caring figures, has been signaled as a determinant of the students' academic success (Martin, Marsh, McInerney, Green & Dawson, 2007) for their adaptation to the school context (Baker, Grant & Morlock, 2008), for good management within the classroom (Riley, 2009) and for healthy peer relationships (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012).

The affective elements between teacher and student and their various consequences in the student's life have been increasingly considered which helps the educational actors to begin to value this relationship as a significant element figure in the life of these future generations (Bombér, 2011).

Rumberger's (1995), analysis of NELS data (National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988 USA) concludes that students who acknowledged that they had caring teachers were less inclined to drop out of school.

## METHODOLOGY

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND GOALS

The study to be developed will be non-experimental, cross-sectional and quantitative. We propose to characterize the relational dimension of this response and how it is associated with school performance, developing an investigation based on two constructs: the attachment and the teacher-student relationship. More specifically it is intended to:

1-Check if there are differences between the internal working model of the PCA students and regular education students;

2 - Review the differences in the representations of teacher-student relationships between PCA students and regular education students;

3- Verify if the internal working model is related to the representations of teacher-student relations.

4- Analyze if the representations of teacher-student relationships are related to school performance.

5- Check if the internal working model and the representations of teacher-student relationships are related to school performance.

In the current research, we hypothesized: 1) that there are differences in the internal models of attachment between PCA students and students in regular education, 2) that secure attachment should be associated with better school performance rather unsecure attachment, 3) the higher quality representations of the student teacher relationship are associated with higher school performance, in PCA students and in regular students

### PROCEDURES

The accomplishment of the study implies, a few bureaucratic requirements: a) authorization of the Regional

Director of Educational Administration b) the board subsequent authorization for the use of the instruments to the respective authors. c)meeting with the school's boards where will be explained the objectives and the procedures and ask them to participate in the study. In a third stage, parents will be involved enabling the participation of their children.

Later, in the classrooms, students will be asked to engage in the application of the instruments. The objectives of the study will have been previously explained, highlighting its voluntary, anonymous and confidential nature.

Finally, after the application of the instruments, the collected data will be processed through the SPSS program.

### INSTRUMENTS

Three instruments will be used:

I. Socio-demographic questionnaire (to be filled by the head of education or by the class tutors) that assesses age, gender, school performance, type of educational course (regular or PCA), promotion and protection measures applied in the previous school year and the geographic framework of the school (rural or urban). The operationalization of school performance in this study will correspond to the final grade for each subject in the last term of the previous school year.

II. Inventory on attachment in Childhood and Adolescence (IVIA), developed by Carvalho, Soares and Baptista (2006). It is a self-questionnaire and parental hetero-evaluation about a set of behaviours and representations about attachment in childhood. In this study, the self-assessment version will be used.

III. IPPA-R - Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment, by Armsden and Greenberg, (1987), is a self-report instrument, validated for the Portuguese population by Machado and Figueiredo in 2010, which analyzes the perception of the quality of the relationship established between students and parents, peers and teachers. This study intends to evaluate the quality of teacher-student attachment.

### SAMPLE

The sample consists of 8th graders students, (year of schooling attended by 38% of students in PCA) in the Autonomous Region of Madeira, in the 2017/18 academic year, divided into two groups:

1. PCA students' group: all classes of the 8th year of PCA, corresponding to 16 classes in 13 RAM schools, with a total of 204 students.

2. Group of students of Regular Education: 13 classes of the 8th year, one in each school with PCA, a total of 210 students.

In each school, a "regular education" group and a PCA group of 8th graders will be included, thus guaranteeing the homogeneity of the two groups regarding the geographical distribution of the students. The group of students in the regular education, will be randomly selected.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the collected data, we will be analyzing how the internal working model of the young person and his perceptions regarding the teacher-student relationship are related to school performance in order to provide decision-makers and actors in the field with scientifically proven information regarding this relational dimension of the educational processes in Madeira (Portugal).

The knowledge of this correlation aims at empowering the schools, educational psychologists and teachers to plan and intervene more constructively and efficiently in the institutional and relational frameworks where teaching and learning take place.

This desired improvement can and should occur in terms of prevention, but in different contexts, and may become beneficial in remediation frameworks.

## CONCLUSION

Having the responsibility to promote students' knowledge, schools need to structure projects, based upon data and elaborate parameters that fulfill the European Community guidelines (Gadotti, 2000).

According to Kermis & Kermis (2010) and Kechagias (2011) employers are looking at a modern professional profile that implies dimensions beyond the technical or strictly scientific knowledge of the área considered. The so-called "soft skills" based on social competences, motivation, emotional intelligence and peer-to-peer relationship, seem to be a more significant part of the actual recruitment assets. School systems should no longer pretend that this change of paradigm hasn't yet occurred within the labour market.

The European Reference Framework (European Communities, 2012) recognizes the importance of social and emotional capacities demanded for personal fulfillment, social inclusion, proactive citizenship and employability in our knowledge-based community. Education has a basic role to play in ensuring that European citizens gain socio-emotional skills (Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 2000).

Accordingly, we can conclude that attachment is the basis for emotional regulation (Sroufe 1996, quoted by Vaz, Martins, & Martins, 2008). This is essential to take on challenges in school and professional contexts.

Bergin & Bergin (2009) and Rydell, Bohlin & Thorell (2005), show that a secure attachment has positive aftereffects on the lives of young people outside the family context, particularly at school, in the sense that it prepares and encourages them to explore the world and initiate new bonds of trust and resilience.

Attachment theory is a framework that may help, promoting psychological and social well-being and is the foundation of personality and socialization evolution (Bowlby, 1988). The emotional and social well-being of young people is relevant to educational success. Thence, educators, from pre-school to higher education, can be more effective if they understand how attachment impacts the students' learning processes (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

School systems are able to make a difference when meeting with the educational goals and emotional needs of future citizens, supporting positive engagement in learning and social inclusion (Geddes, 2006).

Therefore, education and training policies in Europe are at the heart of future changes and they too must adapt.

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