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Conceptual maps as a methodological approach in educational research

*Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Mattos, Luís Paulo Cruz Borges
& Paula Almeida de Castro**

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the use of conceptual maps to analyse inclusion/exclusion in an educational system, and to contribute to the methodology for understanding the meaning of cultural diversity in interactions in schools. This analysis, focusing on the study of a “state of the art” of school failure, arose from the database created for the Nucleus of Ethnography in Education (NetEDU). It was used for the research group’s seminars in 2009 and 2010 about how different technologies, including conceptual maps, could be used in the methodology of educational research. Taking a methodological-epistemological approach in defining categories in order to represent participants’ perspectives, this paper provides a first structured analysis of explanations of school failure in an effort to help demystify the issue for teachers and researchers, and therefore to promote understanding between school teachers and graduate students.

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This article is based on the results of a study entitled “Ethnographic Images of School Exclusion: Educational Failure from the Student Perspective,” and research on the nucleus of ethnography in education (NETEDU) for which the authors, Carmen de Mattos, Paula Castro, and Luís Borges are general coordinator and associate researchers, respectively.

For this investigation, the researchers collected and analysed 700 scientific publications on the theme of educational failure, thus creating a “state of the art” digital database to use for their analyses, and to make available to other students and researchers (<<http://www.netedu.pro.br>>). The database includes theses, dissertations, online scientific periodicals, books, book excerpts, and research reports published between 1995 and 2007. This online process of investigation used relevant scientific databases used by most of Brazil’s top universities as sources of information regarding graduate programs in education, research-funding agencies and associations, educational researchers, electronic journals, virtual libraries, and government policies.

After the extensive process of data collection, the researchers started the second step of their analysis. This process took place in two different phases: first, as a response to the main topic of the seminar, that is, school failure; and secondly to develop the conceptual maps themed for specific seminars.

The four-semester permanent research seminar included the research group of undergraduate, graduate, and faculty researchers, along with the research coordinator. Teachers from public schools were also welcome to attend. The seminar meetings, each lasting about three hours, took place weekly in the graduate department of Applied Studies in Education and at the Graduate Program in Education (ProPEd) at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). During each of the four semesters, each participant presented a text, using a Power Point presentation, as a means of initiating conversation. A total of about 300 texts, that we thought would be significant to the recurring issues addressed in our study, were therefore read, presented, and discussed in detail.

As a way of discussing our understanding of the main ideas in these articles, we created conceptual maps representing the ideas. This

instrument was developed in the 1970s in the U.S. by the researcher Joseph Novak. According to Novak, conceptual maps provide a way to organize and represent knowledge, and these maps are closely linked to issues of metacognition, which enable learning by structuring knowledge in its dynamic process of transformation (Novak, 1991).

Table 1. Summary of conceptual maps

References	Explanations for school failure
Low academic performance	
Combs & Cooley (1986)	Truancy is associated with poor academic performance as measured by low grades in school and low evaluation scores on standardized tests.
Cook (1956)	School failure is linked to low marks and dropping out.
Meritocracy	
Davis & Moore (1945)	Students are assessed more according to their capabilities than their social status, gender, or race. Meritocracy's underlying principle of equal opportunity serves three main functions in the development of a nation state: i) through selection based on capability, it supports efficiency in the labor market; ii) through its assessment of students, it is a moral principle based on justice; and iii) it is an instrument of assimilation.
Parson (1959)	
Grade Repetition	
Ribeiro (1991)	Having to repeat grades is the main obstacle to advancing students' education and cognitive skills.
Patto (1990)	Cultural deprivation, which particularly affects children from the lower classes, dominates the discourse explaining school failure.
Crahay (2006)	Repeating grades does not help students to overcome the obstacles causing them difficulty at school.
Source: Mattos & Castro (2010) <i>Gender and Poverty: School Failure</i>	

The analyses derived from our maps were qualitative, allowing us to analyse the basis on which each author explained school failure, which therefore contributed to our overall understanding of current research on school failure. The maps show clearly the set of concepts which were constructed through the production of knowledge that took place over the course of the seminar. During the seminar meetings, all participants shared the tasks of reading and taking notes about the various authors' explanations for school failure, and their methodological and theoretical approaches to the topic. The research group then incorporated these notes in conceptual maps. The next step was to summarize and categorize the knowledge created by the maps under the topic "low academic performance, meritocracy, grade repetition". Table 1 summarises the contents of the different conceptual maps which were used to analyse the data collected on the topic "inclusion/exclusion at school failure".

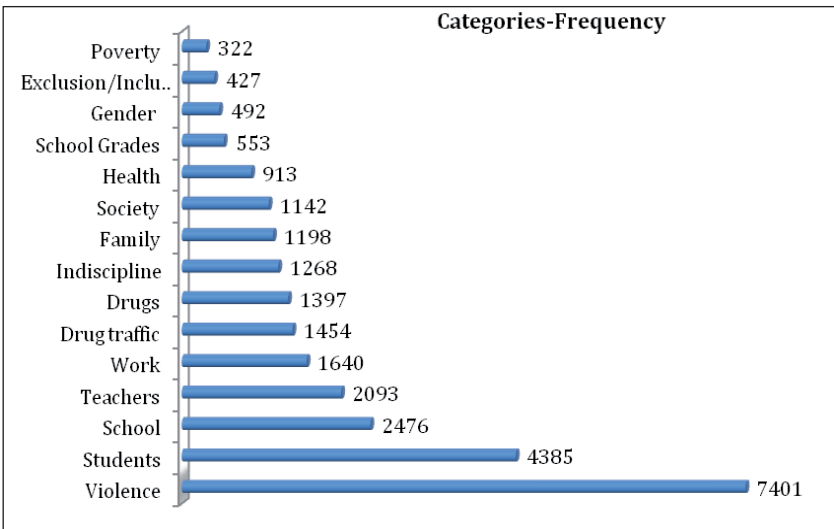
Yin (2005) explained that in recent years, "software has become more diverse and functional". He explains that "the tools can help you code and categorize large amounts of narrative text, as might have been collected from open-ended interviews or from large volumes of written materials, such as newspaper articles. Guidance on coding skills and techniques also has improved" (Yin, 2005, p. 128). Bogdan and Biklen (1994) also pointed out that computer analysis is similar to mechanical forms of analysis but has the advantage of reducing the volume of paper used by an assessment team. The computer analysis also facilitated the later searches in the text of the analysis.

Atlas.ti software was used to categorize the electronic data used in this study. It became an important tool for data analysis and has been used in several investigations carried out by the NetEDU researchers (Bragança, 2008; Castro, 2006) and others. These can be found at <www.netedu.pro.br>. In each case, *Atlas.ti* assisted the group in generating more reliable data results and in constructing conceptual maps. In this type of "state of the art" research, losing or overlooking data before it is analysed is not uncommon because researchers may be collecting data over a long period of time. Conceptual maps, however, offer a means of representing and preserving that data.

The data which has been collected, and analyses based on the issues of inclusion/exclusion/school failure, was explored in the articles according to their significance in the school context. These results generated a new form of data organization and the creation of conceptual maps illustrating how school failure has been described and understood by the scholars who had investigated it, as well as by the researchers participating in the NetEDU group. After the first step of the analysis, the material was submitted to *Atlas.ti* software at four points in the process of conceptual maps construction: during (1) visualization of data, (2) integration of data, (3) identification of data that were not being sought, and (4) exploration of theories related to the chosen theme (for our research group, the theme of school failure).

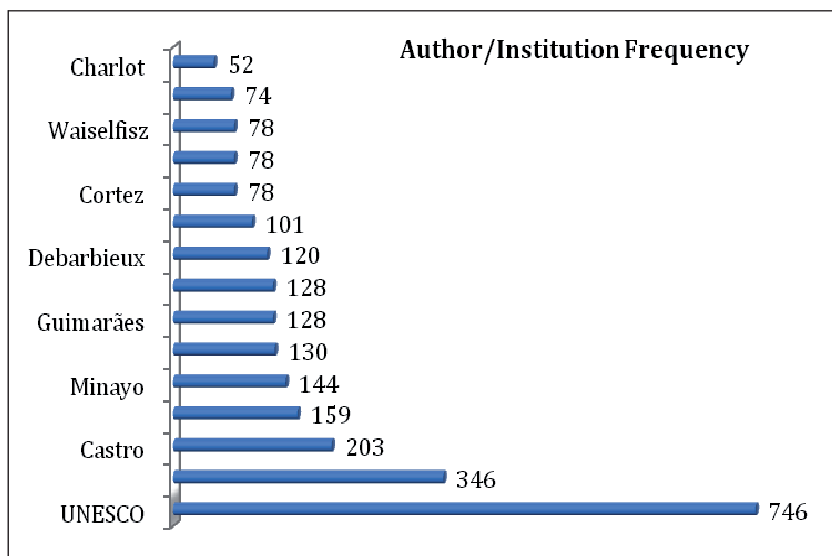
By clarifying recurrences in our data analysis of the theme of inclusion/exclusion at school, these methodological tools helped us to construct our conclusions. Figure1 indicates the recurrence of themes regarding school failure in the literature surveyed in the seminars, mapped, and then analysed with *Atlas.ti*.

Figure 1. Frequency of categories.



Source: NETEDU database on School Failure 2010

Figure 2. Author/Institution Frequency of citation.



Source: NETEDU database on School Failure 2010.

Overall, our process of analysis indicated that the themes of inclusion/exclusion in school failure are a challenge to the teaching practices in Brazilian public schools. These themes may therefore be considered nodal points in the educational setting. The conclusion is that this study may contribute to how teachers, students, managers and other professionals in different sectors of education understand school failure, with the aim of reconfiguring interaction in the classroom in order to improve the quality of the educational process.

Challenges for improving the quality of education

The challenge to improve the quality of the educational process is to use innovation in educational research. As the data shows (Figure 1), the themes/categories which emerged from the articles studied are: violence, teaching, working students, school involvement with drug traffic, students and parents drug use, lack of classroom discipline,

family instability and vulnerability, poor socio-culture environment, poor health services, grade retention, and gender issues, among others. They showed the basic problems remain unresolved and the need to research them in Brazilian schools. The data also showed that exclusion/inclusion, together with poverty, are closely associated with the themes analysed.

The use of conceptual maps and *Atlas.ti* in our analysis of data concerning inclusion/exclusion in school failure shows their great value as a methodological tool in educational research. In this section, we present the theoretical explanations for school failure that we established by using conceptual maps and *Atlas.ti* in our research seminars.

The fundamental aim of education in Brazil can be summarised by the expression “all and for all.” Over the past few decades, Brazilian schools have been focusing on addressing the needs of basic school student populations who are, in general, considered to be disadvantaged. Schools have been inventing, and reinventing, their programs to meet these demands, as Candau (2008) has shown.

From a historical perspective, it is fair to say that with its formation, the Brazilian National Republic did not take into consideration the diversity of the populations constituting its society, although according to Connell (1997), this social diversity is the source of the state’s power. Initially, the educational objective of the Republic, based on ideals of positivism and rationalism, was to establish a new, unified notion of citizenship. Throughout the nineteenth century, although a large number of pupils from poor families attended public schools, these students enjoyed little educational success (Connell, 1997; Patto, 1999). These results reinforced the misconception that children and adolescents from poor families are also poor in cognitive, cultural, genetic, and political characteristics.

The relationship between students’ access to basic education, and keeping them in education, across the country offers insight into the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion that occurs within schools. This connection between initial and continuing school attendance reveals that the national public education system is providing what Ferraro and Machado (2002) described as “pseudo-universality” in education. These authors discuss “twists” in the ideal of universality that create

exclusion. Bourdieu and Champagne (2001) discussed the exclusion that occurs within schools. Schools have become places where the poor are brought, but their teachers have few social and cultural insights into how to prevent “schools for the poor, being poor” (Guimarães, 1998, p. 58). This issue must be addressed in any inquiry into the universalization and quality of basic schools. Thanks to the efforts of educators over the last two decades “secure access, retention and [grade] completion [of] elementary school” (Oliveira, 2007, p. 982) are no longer the greatest challenges facing educators. The central issue is now whether or not Brazilian schools have improved in quality, and if the country’s political policies satisfy the demand for better programs and planning.

Brazil’s public education system has overcome its historic practice of excluding children and young people from schools, which is a notable triumph. However, schools are now clearly struggling with new problems. Because the opening of access to “education for all” that existent for almost three decades did not provide the opportunities it pledged by the system. This means that there is a large population aged 4 to 70 years that has never attended school. Although educational exclusion has recently gained visibility, through statistics on repeating and dropout rates, national statistics show that nation-wide, 97% of public school-aged children attend school. In contrast, in the 1970s only 29.3% of eligible children were enrolled in grade one, and only 5% were attending school by grade eight. Since then, the issue of school failure has therefore shaped most public policies affecting education, as well as the teaching and learning processes in place at schools. This situation raises the question of how school processes are involved in shaping public policy.

Steady enrolment rates, analysed from data of school failure in this research, together with the universalization of elementary education, have created continuity in school flow (Oliveira, 2007, pp. 674-675). Nevertheless, educators perceive a new concern, the “production of school failure” (Patto, 1999) and its consequences in daily life at Brazilian schools. Despite the efforts of several institutions responsible for basic education in Brazil to promote democracy in schools, these efforts have not been able to ensure fair, high-quality education. A

space that is considered to be inclusive can also be exclusive, as may be experienced by those who were initially included, but then fail, may experience (Veiga-Neto, 2007, p. 959). This is a contradictory and undemocratic process, as Oliveira (2007) pointed out.

Final comments

In this paper about research into school failure, we addressed the relationships between schools, exclusion/inclusion, and cultural diversity, which are important topics of study in the discussion of quality education. André (2007) suggests that recurrent failure in Brazilian public schools arises from a model of education that inadequately recognizes and teaches cultural differences. In regard to the need for pedagogy to reflect differences in the classroom, she argued that education must include “differentiation within open and varied teaching situations, confronting each student with what is an obstacle for him in the construction of knowledge” (p. 12). Since they allow for a reflexive theoretical and methodological scenario of investigation, conceptual maps are important instruments for researchers in education. The combined use of conceptual maps and *Atlas.ti* software therefore presents education scholars with some analytical possibilities for exploring data and exercising analytical rigor.

The issue of educational inclusion/exclusion has arisen from the inadequacies that have permeated Brazilian public schools for decades (Patto, 1999). Although many elementary and high school students around the country are circulating in and out of school (that is, being repeatedly but only temporarily “included” by schools), their educational experience may not meet their needs. The curriculum and pedagogy employed in public schools still excludes pupils who fall outside of the dominant culture. This phenomenon, the focus of our study, was guided by our view that “differentiation requires an awareness and respect for differences, the right to speak freely and to be heard, allowing each to be recognized by the group, whatever their scholastic abilities or their cultural level” (Andrew, 2007, p. 20).

Even though over 97% of school-aged children have access to school today in Brazil, school failure remains a challenge to the

system and government. Essentially, the realities of school failure in Brazil show that the Cartesian political ideal, whereby teachers should work with students in their own communities, does not meet the expectations and needs of actual students (Patto, 2005). Indeed, the present situation raises the question of whether students are in fact part of the public school system. Furthermore, public school students are facing the alarming prospect of attending schools without learning even the most basic knowledge necessary for them to function in society.

How can we explain why these students do not learn if they stay in school? Ferraro and Machado (2002) have documented how exclusion in school has led, for instance, to students in the eighth grade not yet being able to read or write. The failure of some students, those who remain in school but do not learn, points to the mistakes of the exclusive education system. These children are forced to struggle, fight, or submit to inadequate school practices in order to survive the education system.

The aim of this paper has been to reveal some answers to these questions and to show how to analyse data in an innovative way, and also to adapt instruments, such as conceptual maps, to the data. We hope to have contributed to the possibility of using conceptual maps and *Atlas. ti* software in studies about classrooms, and to have given visibility to the social contingencies of the public school process. It is this process which leads to the construction of self-determination, and empathy towards the needs of students and teachers, which are the important issues in the everyday classroom, by outlining possible directions for handling the educational exclusion of groups considered at risk for socio-educational government statistics.

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