

Hierarchies in family and school: Study of children's positioning in relation to school success.

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Most of the research that has been developed by the ESSA group (Sociological Studies of the Classroom) has been focused on an extensive and deep understanding of school learning and on the definition and concretization of innovative action guidelines for school education. The research has been theoretically grounded in aspects of epistemology, psychology and sociology, where Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse is the central matrix to guide a multilayered conceptualization of students' failure/success in school. Reasons for this failure/success have been studied, considering the multiple characteristics of primary socializing contexts (family/community) and secondary socializing contexts (classroom/school) and their interrelations. Studies have also looked for teachers' practices that may lead students who enter school in disadvantage to overcome their difficulties (e.g. Morais & Neves, 2001; Neves & Morais, 2005).

In order to analyse students' learning in relation to the sociological characteristics of family and school contexts, Bernstein's concepts of coding orientation and *positioning* have been used, by studying, for example, the extent to which codes and positioning acquired in family and/or school may condition learning of students from distinct social groups and within the same social group.

Various studies of the ESSA Group have been focused on the development of an external language of description that put into operation the concept of coding orientation as a variable that interferes on students' learning, in specific instructional and regulative contexts of the classroom, and results of those studies have shown the influence of this variable on school success (e.g. Morais & Neves, 2001).

This article intends to report studies where *positioning* was also taken as a differential characteristic of family and school contexts that may be a factor of school failure/success. The objective of the article is: (1) to explicate the meaning accorded to positioning in the studies done so far, by showing instruments to obtain and to analyse data and making clear the development of the respective external language of description; (2) to present the results of the studies, highlighting the importance of introducing this variable in the analyses of school learning of socially differentiated children.

According to Bernstein (1990), the principle of the social division of labour, created by class structure, determines both a differential position of subjects in the social hierarchical structure and specific social relations between them. This process defines subjects positioning and, simultaneously, conditions their access to differential forms of communication. As stated by Bernstein, "positioning is used [...] to refer to the establishing of a specific relation to other subjects and to the creating of specific relationships within subjects." (pp. 13). Starting from this theorization, positioning was taken in the studies as a

sociological dimension which, reflecting power and control relations present in any hierarchical structure (broad society, community, family, school), manifests itself at the level of the subject (citizen/child/student) through the form s/he sees herself/himself valued in society/family/school. In terms of empirical research, the nature of the hierarchical structure (power relations) and the form taken by social relations (control relations) in the contexts of primary socialization (between parents and children) and secondary socialization (between teachers and students) were used as indicators that allow the characterization of child/student's positioning in the social context where s/he is placed and the extent to which that positioning may constitute a mediating variable between social group and school success.

The studies about the influence of positioning on school failure/success focused on various socializing contexts (family, community, school, classroom) and their interrelations and, according to the specificity of each study, instruments (questionnaires, interviews) and models were made in order to collect and analyse various dimensions of positioning – in society, in family/community and in school. A mixed methodology was used in the studies.

Broadly, the studies made so far (e.g. Neves, 1992 ; Miranda & Morais, 1996; Pires, 2001) suggest that, in general, the positioning is influenced by students' social group, lower positioning being acquired by students of lower social classes and, within them, by girls and by those who study in schools of disadvantaged social contexts. They also suggest that high positioning influences favourably students' success. The existence of the relation "social group – positioning in the family/community – positioning in the school – school achievement" supports the idea that the positioning acquired by the child in the primary socializing context is one of the sociological factors that may explain the relation between social group and differential achievement. However, the studies also highlight the importance of the positioning acquired in the secondary socializing context to change that pattern, suggesting that the effect of school/pedagogic practice may overcome the effect of social class. Another interesting result of the studies is that the relation child's positioning in the family/social class is not linear, as it can be altered whenever parents are active in agencies of challenge/opposition/cultural reproduction. Also a not always linear relation has been found between positioning and coding orientation.

All these relations and conclusions are discussed in the article and new paths for further research are suggested.

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