

130 Levelling as a remedial education dispositif to govern the entry of non-traditional students within the inclusive Latin American University

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Levelling refers to remedial strategies usually focused on non-traditional students to foster their post-entry inclusion. Here I investigate about such construction, as a remedial education dispositif to govern their entrance in-between teaching, management and research. From an archive of conference/journal papers and policy documents from 12 countries, and interviews of Chilean affirmative action practitioners, this study adumbrates a system of relations of discourses, professionalisms, expert knowledges and practices that strategically construct gaps and slopes, as objects, and vulnerable students, as subjects, to level-up. I argue about a line of subjectification that invites students to be eager to participate, open to intervention and thankful of support, as well as affirmative action practitioner to be proud and useful agents of inclusion. Finally, levelling, as curricular and supplementary teaching, derives from assessment of academic and social vulnerability, as well as studies that legitimize what to measure and intervene to foster student retention.

Full paper

Levelling as an inclusion imperative

At the junction of equity of access and equity for retention in Latin American Higher Education (HE), levelling refers to a set of remedial strategies to foster student readiness derived from US retention studies (Miranda-Molina, 2023). Within this problematization the historical underrepresentation of broad social groups is attributed to their insufficient preparation, funding the need to level them up beyond entry (Miranda-Molina, 2022a). As an equity problematic (Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2000) injustice here is constructed as previous and external to the University, legitimizing the intervention of non-traditional student trajectories as an inclusion imperative (Miranda-Molina, 2022b).

This research is framed in critical studies of educational policy (Ozga, 2019) and its problematizations (Bacchi, 2012), to understand the way in which levelling is -discursively and non-discursively- constructed. As a possible dispositif this would be a system of relations of discourses, policies, institutions, expert knowledges, subject positions, scientific and moral propositions (Foucault, 1980), amongst others, to produce certain visibilities, enunciabilities, lines of force and subjectification (Ball & Grimaldi, 2022). I argue about a remedial education dispositif to produce post-entry interventions as a feature of the inclusive University, to equalize differences of performance (enacted as gaps and slopes) between traditional and non-traditional students (Miranda-Molina, 2022a).

Methodologically this study is based on an archive of 233 conference papers, 39 journal articles and 49 policy documents, all of which address levelling in 12 countries between 2011 and 2021. It also considers semi-structured interviews with 18 affirmative action practitioners of 8 Chilean universities, regarding the challenges of non-traditional students beyond access. This analysis is mostly focused on discursive and non-discursive practices that construct the levelling objects and subjects, from a system of relations of multiple discourses, professionalisms, expert knowledges and practices that strategically articulate teaching, management and research.

The levelling dispositif

In the teaching arena, levelling is carried out by faculty to prepare new students for the subsequent curricular levels. This internalization of the levelling problem, enacted as a gateway or developmental courses, is structured by competence-based discourses and expert knowledges from disciplines judged both critical and elementary. But also, an extracurricular deployment of levelling, enacted as supplementary support for low performers, is developed in

learning centers by non-departmental teachers and peer tutors. Here, powerful discourses (Veiga-neto & Lopes, 2010) of deficit, about the risk of non-completion given a vulnerable social background is the basis of differentiating the levelling subject from the normal student, to be intervened outside curriculum.

In this arena a strong line of subjectification requires the participation of the levelling subject, pushed to be open to intervention (Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015) as well as to work on himself to achieve the proper autonomy of the higher learner. This would be a regime of subjectification to produce an eager to participate, open to be intervened and thankful for being supported subject. It also invites the levelling practitioner to be proud useful agents of inclusion.

A second arena is the deployment of assessment technologies to individualize the levelling subject, intervene and monitor his entry trajectory. Typically deployed from specialized centers and non-academic professionals and managers, institutional student profiles constitute a starting point to define a set of characteristics aimed to measure the risk of dropping out. This brings into play expert knowledges linked to "critical" disciplines (of high failure), as well as methodological (psychometric and mathematical), summoning experts to make academic and social vulnerability visible. Such construction tends to be naturalized as it presents the profile as a picture of the vulnerable subject, deficit discourse that produces a paradoxical subject carrying lacks.

A third arena is research, from which the main assumptions are legitimized to build profiles, monitoring systems and remedial strategies. With a strong influence of US retention studies, the relevance measures and intervention practices are sustained from quantitative studies that produce the explanatory weight of performance indicators and other measures expressive of social vulnerability. Thus, researchers mobilize a mathematical discourse of regression studies and explanatory models which operate as discourses of truth about who would have a greater probability of dropping out and what works to reduce such risk.

To problematize the constructed nature of levelling, as a dispositif governing the entry of non-traditional students, requires to address an internal articulation -and not just an external causation- of discursive and non-discursive practices to construct its objects and subjects. These results contribute to adumbrate a relationship between research and practice productive of a specific form of entrance for non-traditional students as a current facet of the -aspiring to be- inclusive university.

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