

**21**

## **Gaps and slopes: the problem of 'leveling' non-traditional students in Latin American Higher Education**

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### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

Based on a post-structural analysis guided by deficit discourse critique, this paper reports on research about the 'leveling' problem in Latin American Higher Education (HE), from a problematization that chains access and retention (in)equities as stages in the educational mobility of underrepresented social groups. The problem represented in 180 leveling papers from a student dropout congress is outlined, from a discursive strategy that constructs remedial education as an institutional commitment to remedy the consequences of a poor-quality educational system. This is also a problem about social groups (of low income, of non-white ethnicities, of rural origin or disabled) placed in leveling from assessment technologies guided by the metaphors of gaps and slopes, in which they occupy the lower levels of student readiness. These results contribute to an emerging body of Latin American studies that seek to rethink deficit conceptualizations in order challenge the marginalization of non-traditional students within HE

### **Full paper**

#### **The 'leveling' problem from deficit critique**

Leveling is a recurrent name for remedial strategies in the context of Latin American equity-for-retention policies, drawing on research

about pre-college, curricular and extra-curricular courses (Santelices et al., 2015) for improving student readiness. Besides the translation of several terms, such as, preparatory, gateway, developmental and remedial, as nivelación (leveling in Spanish), it involves a reading of US retention studies that favors supplementary and focused interventions on students deemed underprepared given a non-traditional origin (Miranda-Molina, 2022).

The leveling problem is inscribed at the junction of equity-of-access and equity-for-retention, from a problematization that chains them as stages using a cultural deprivation argument (Smit, 2012), that is, the underrepresentation of broad social groups in HE and their lower retention rates are both a consequence of their insufficient preparation. This is also constructed as the main barrier for their social mobility, frequently quoting Tinto's title (2008) as a slogan: access without support is no opportunity (c.f. Irigoien et al., 2013). Given the relevance of academic support for addressing the challenges of non-traditional students in HE (Didou, 2021; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021), this association of access and retention (in)equities, and the umbrella function of the leveling term, makes it relevant to interrogate the discursive construction of this policy problem from a critique of deficit discourses (Iverson, 2012).

Deficit critique is productive for challenging assumed truths about marginalized social groups, such as the core deficit assumption in US dominant perspectives of retention (Cabrera et al., 2014). This rationale tends to make non-traditional students responsible of their own results (Bensimon, 2005), and constitutes a cultural barrier for acknowledging conditions and practices necessary to improve. Even so, their representation as an institutional risk serves to construct them as a major foci of intervention (O'Shea et al., 2016). However, neither the labeling practices of "at risk" or "underprepared" (Castro, 2014), nor the diagnosis that precedes them, are neutral, as they embody power relations that reproduce inequalities (Aikman et al., 2016). As McKay and Devlin suggest (2016), to rethink the deficit conceptualization is a fundamental task for challenging how these social groups are subsequently treated within HE.

## **Deconstructing 'leveling'**

This research was aimed to deconstruct (Youdell, 2006) the leveling

problem from a deficit discourse critique. Methodologically, a post-structural mode of analysis was carried out (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) over 180 papers about leveling, presented from 2011 through 2019 in a Latin American congress about student dropout. The goal was to interrogate the problem represented (Bacchi, 2012) in leveling proposals which are presented as good practices improving student readiness.

Framing leveling as an institutional commitment to address inequality, the problem is represented as a consequence of a poor-quality educational system. This locates the cause outside HE, diffusing the tension between institutional pride (Ahmed, 2012) and the acknowledgement of a recurring problem. Inequality is, therefore, brought into the university by non-traditional students (in their backpacks, so to speak) from an external and previous context.

The educational trajectory of the leveling subject is represented as a past lacking educational opportunities that explains their current unreadiness and so, as a risk factor, foretells academic failure and drop-out. Hence, an educational trajectory deem to intervene in a timely manner, in a tension between propaedeutics and remediation that arises from placing pre-college content in an already college-level curriculum.

The leveling subject is first expected to stem from historically excluded social groups (such as low-income, non-white, rural or disabled), and after acceptance is actually placed in leveling throughout assessment technologies guided by the metaphors of gaps and slopes. While a gap involves a lower than required performance and a slope a lower than average, both normative definitions position the leveling subject in the lower level, and constitute the performance difference as the leveling object.

As generally underprepared, the leveling subject is paradoxically constructed as carrying lacks, which from a competence-based model is to be leveled by filling blanks (knowledges), strengthening weaknesses (skills) and accompanying a lack of autonomy (attitudes). These leveling functions constitute an integral intervention of a lower cultural capital that explains underperformance and non-completion.

These results, focused on HE practitioner reports, account for their interpretation of access and retention (in)equities through the deconstruction of the leveling problem, and contribute to an emerging body of deficit critique in Latin American HE (e.g. Ávila et al., 2020). Further questions should be considered about the performative effects of this interpretation in the production of deficit and subsequent positioning of non-traditional students into segregated and/or marginalized spaces of remediation.

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