

# Class Directors and Parents: Contrasting Principles and Practices

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The relevance of the relationship between schools and families to foster educational success, and as a principle of the implementation of democratic practices, enhancing the promotion of equality, is, nowadays, more accepted, even though the building of this collaboration falls short of all speeches and intentions. The class director's (CD) position provides a space in which this relationship can be solidified with the mediating role assigned to the CD being just one aspect of the *triple function* that characterizes that post. In this article, empirically based on a qualitative study, made up of interviews to CDs, we seek to analyze the latter's representations on the participation of parents/guardians (PG) in the educational practices in schools. From their narratives, we propose an interpretation and a discussion that seek to discuss the relational complexity between the CDs and the Parents, which has as its origin the heterogeneity of their cultures, namely the *social cleavage in the participation of families*, and, also, the *kind and levels of participation* that are offered to or claimed by parents in the sessions organized by the CD.

*Keywords:* Class Director, participation, relationship parents-class directors

## Introduction

The relevance of the relationship between schools and families to foster educational success, and as a principle of the implementation of democratic practices, is nowadays more widely accepted by the community as a whole. Nevertheless, in a significant number of schools the promotion of such collaboration falls short of all speeches and intentions. The fact is that, through legislation, the Ministry of Education encourages this partnership; however, studies show that when parental involvement "is required or encouraged by the law, it remains scarce or illusory" (Montandon, 2001, p. 157). In recent years, research conducted on this issue has been increasing and has shown the complexity of this relation, stemming from the cultural heterogeneity in schools, which may account for the disparity between the collaborative principles advocated in official discourse and their (none) implementation in practice. Furthermore, the relation has taken on such diverse forms that the

question arises, according to Silva (2003) whether, in general terms, one may be dealing with an *undermined relationship*; in other words, when discussing the relationship between schools and families does it involve a horizontal dialogue and the existence of a real partnership in which each party, in turn, listens and is listened to, or does it, in contrast, refer to a relationship which may be manipulated from within schools and their regulatory frameworks so as to get parents to act according to the established rules without having the chance to put forward new proposals and dynamics for their children's school life?

In addition to this issue, questions may arise regarding the effective implementation of democracy and the exercise of citizenship within Portuguese public schools. The exercise of citizenship is today understood as a duty and as a right to be enjoyed within any educational context. Within schools, all protagonists are invited to exercise practices of citizenship. No one is excluded; even the less important parties have the right to participate in decisions that, for some reason, may have an influence on academic life (Sarmento, & Freire, 2012). However, as the Portuguese public schools are part of a centralized administrative system, teachers do

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not often get the chance to take part in truly significant decisions in terms of school organization. Thus, it may not be easy for this group to share its reduced powers with other educational actors, namely PGs.

On the other hand, in recent years, *quasi-market education* (cf. Le Grand, 1991) trends have been introduced in Portugal, placing a stronger emphasis on students' academic achievements and thereby transforming PGs into *consumers*. Under this system, parents/guardians are given the possibility of choosing their children's school. However, this option has been criticized since "Parents' freedom to choose their children's school underscores the economic, social and ethnic stratification between schools, as the criteria used by parents of a higher socioeconomic status are based on the 'quality' of the students rather than on the quality of the learning, whereas working class or ethnic minority parents do not have the information, the time or the resources to identify the 'good schools' and even if they did, they would lack the means to be able to pursue their option" (Barroso, 2003, p. 92). In other words, and in line with Ball (1995), the market is not neutral, it assumes certain abilities, skills and material possibilities (time, transport, etc.), which are unevenly distributed among the population. Therefore, the quasi-market in education entails the possession of the required cultural code so as to be able to decode the exhibited objects" (1995, p. 215-216).

The CD's position, while providing a context for the consolidation of the school-family relationship, is permeated by these diverse and conflicting logics and is thus characterized by multiple complexities and uncertainties.

The CD's role is threefold: coordinating the teaching staff of a particular class; guiding students towards educational success and mediating the relation between the school and the families. This article will focus on issues which we believe to be at the core of the work carried out by CDs in their relationship with PGs.

#### **Methodological note on the interface between teaching and research.**

The current article was based on collaborative research carried out by a team of professors and master's students within the framework of the subject *Educational Coordination and Class Directorship*<sup>1</sup>

In order to collect and analyse the opinions of CDs on their educational coordination work with

students/parents/ teachers, an interview script to be used by the master's students in their interviews was drawn up collaboratively. A total of twenty –seven interviews were held (twenty females<sup>2</sup> and seven males) and the experience the teachers had in such a post varied widely, ranging from two to twenty one years.

There were different phases in the research preparation: initially, and bearing in mind that this work was carried out with master's students becoming familiarised with research processes, a methodological approach to interviews as a data collection strategy was undertaken with focus on both theoretical and technical principles. Afterwards, in each of the master's degree classes, groups of students selected one of the dimensions of the CD's roles- students' educational guidance, pedagogical coordination of teaching staff; relationship with parents- and drew up a set of questions focusing on it, which then got the approval of the class. The professors, authors of the article, then collected the results from the different classes, selected and systematised the questions, putting forward a pilot questionnaire which was in turn analysed and validated in each of the classes. The feedback obtained resulted in the final script that each group used in their interview with a class director of their choice.

As far as the training of master's students is concerned, it should be pointed out that besides reflecting on theoretical aspects pertaining to pedagogic middle management and to components of research, the students had direct contact with a CD bringing them closer to the reality of daily school life and thereby contributing to a better linkage between theoretical knowledge and teachers' practical knowledge.

The interviews were then fully transcribed and discussed in groups in each of the classes in the light of a set of studies and texts selected and suggested by the professors and deemed to be relevant to the themes and issues at hand.

The next stage in the research, now entirely undertaken by the authors, consisted of processing the information in the *corpus* constituted by the twenty-seven interviews, which was carried out using content analysis methods as proposed by Maroy (1997). After the full transcription of the answers, a preliminary reading was made so as to produce an analysis grid with categories established by the authors. An examination of their content ensued followed by a final sociological interpretation.

<sup>1</sup>This is a subject common to all the Master's Degrees in 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle and Secondary Teaching, which adds up to twelve courses divided into six classes with a teaching staff of four professors.

<sup>2</sup>Most of the teachers appointed class directors are female, possibly (a hypothesis that requires empirical confirmation) due to the connection that is made between female roles and guiding and overseeing functions.

**The role of the class director in the relationship with parents /guardians: school-family communication and encouraging parental support for children's learning activities.**

Communication between school and families in each particular case is always regarded as a complex issue bearing in mind the uniqueness of the former and the plurality of the latter. Each school unit, be it a school cluster, a private school or a non-grouped school, has its own educational project, internal regulations and working culture, which may not necessarily be uniform but tends to focus on certain patterns of behaviour and develop its own distinctiveness. On the other hand, the children and teenagers that attend that particular school belong to families that are very diverse in socioeconomic and cultural terms with varying expectations with regard to schooling and different representations concerning possible (non)collaboration with the school system. The CD, in her capacity as a liaison with the PGs needs to manage this relational complexity so as to engage their support for their children's learning, hoping to ensure that "Parents and teachers have made a commitment to a fruitful and mutual dialogue on behalf of the quality of education" (Sarmiento, & Freire, 2012,p.106), bearing in mind that "The existence of harmonious relations between the educational community, the school, the children and the family is dependent on everyone's ability to understand and communicate with each other. It should be based on a process of mutual respect, tolerance and recognition of diverse points of view, in order to provide students with optimum conditions for learning, leading them to educational success".

In the interviews conducted for this research, when questioned about their role with regard to PGs, CD's consider themselves as a "link between the school and the families" (nine cases), "the main intermediary between the school and the families" (six cases) and as someone who "provides a bridge between the two parties" (three cases).

When further examining this role, it was found that the CD's actions are geared towards communicating with PGs on a variety of issues, revealing three of the first four levels<sup>3</sup> of the

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<sup>3</sup>Joyce Epstein (1997) wrote a scale of parents-school relationship, where identified these levels of cooperation: 1. Basic family obligations: activities developed by the school which help families carry out their basic obligations. 2. Basic school obligations: basic obligations that the school has to families, namely those concerning curricula and student progress. 4. Involvement in home activities: 5. initiatives taken by teachers to

typology proposed by Joyce Epstein which we have followed in the parental involvement analysis.

Some of the CD's vaguely made reference to the actual content of the information passed on, stating that when informing the PG, "(...) the class director has to use all the means available to get the parents to the school, ensure that they are participative and keep them up to date with what is going on at school, particularly as far as their children are concerned" (E11); "It is through them [CD's] that information about the students gets to the families" (E17). Therefore, it seems the CD's are concerned about not only passing on information but also engaging parents in their children's school life.

Other CD's provided details about the content, stating that the information pertained to the student's school career as far as behavior, attendance and cognitive dimensions were concerned.

"The CD has to provide information about the school, inform PGs of the activities carried out therein, and also keep them informed of their children's achievement, behavior and attendance" (E20).

"(...) fostering greater parental involvement in their children's school life" (E24)

However, the overwhelming majority of the interviewed CD's didn't only pass on information, but also take the opportunity to foster parental involvement in learning activities. They provide support and information on how parents can assist their children in activities directly connected with learning. They seek, thus, to "share action strategies so as to minimize difficulties that may arise in terms of academic achievement" (E3) and "to foster permanent dialogue so as to ensure reciprocal clarification and collaboration in the teaching-learning processes" (E23). It should be noted that in these two extracts, the "strategy sharing" and the "reciprocal collaboration" mentioned convey the idea of effective dialogue along with openness to a partnership in which both interlocutors take on the roles of participants. When compared with the remaining narratives, what stands out in these cases is how the action is bidirectional as opposed to others which linguistically reinforce the unidirectional flow of information from members of the school to PGs, who thus become mere receivers of information.

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involve and guide families in supporting their children's learning activities at home.

For some of the CDs their duty to support and inform is not restricted to learning activities but understood in more global terms to extend to the student's overall education and growth:

"(...) [they] should seek to get PGs committed to collaborating with the school, ( ...) so as to optimize strategies that will lead to better student achievement and integration. The CDs' liaison role should result in families being brought closer and feeling empowered to take an active role their children's school life" (E20)

"(...) it is mainly up to the CD to encourage PGs to take an active interest in their children's work (...) to be able to encourage and talk to them as well as to alert them and raise their awareness" (E16)

On the other hand, CDs are sensitive to the difficulties experienced by PGs and see themselves as someone in school who is able to answer questions they may have : " (...) understand that they are parents who have questions, who very often have trouble understanding their children's difficulties" (E13); "(...) the CD's role is to advise, guide and answer parents' questions in an easily understandable manner so as to ensure they feel comfortable and see school as an extension of their own homes" (E10).

Having these goals in mind, namely communicating with and providing effective assistance to PGs, the CDs employ a variety of contact strategies, which may be identified as "basic school obligations" within level two of Epstein's typology, such as seeing PGs outside the stipulated weekly office hours, making phone calls and using written correspondence:

"I was available to see them, even outside office hours. Even when they turned up without any prior notice, I never refused to see them and share all the information I had about their child's school life" (E3).

"That's how I go about it, I make it as easy as possible for them ( PGs ) to contact me (...) if they can't make it at a time when I am available at school, well , then that's just isn't a problem for me. Whenever the PGs are unable to come to meetings, then I have to see them personally; very often they work shifts and if I am at school one day in the morning, at lunch time or in the late

afternoon I don't mind seeing them at all. I also use the phone a lot." (E7)

"The CD (...) makes heaps of phone calls and sends loads of registered letters" ( E11)

"(...) which means regular phone calls and monthly written correspondence" (E2)

It should be noted that most of the CDs view their position as providing an ideal context for communication from the school to families and develop a range of strategies to ensure that such communication does take place. However, its content seems for the most part to be confined to providing information and support to families on how they can help in the matter of their children's cognitive learning processes, in accordance with models set up by the school. On the other hand, there is a noticeable absence of references in the CDs' discourses to communication in the opposite direction, i.e., from families to school, nor is there a perception of the CD's position as a context wherein PGs may have a *participation which is active and divergent* (Lima, 1992) from the teachers' and the school management's, namely the CDs', perspective. This is to say that the CDs' discourses appear to bring to the fore the asymmetric feature of the relationship with PGs, in which the action is defined by the teachers with the PGs being unable to present alternatives to the principles and methods advocated by the school. However, an effective understanding of *partnerships* entails dialogue and a horizontal approach in which both parties (teachers and PGs) listen and are listened to, thus we do question the ownership that the class directors take of this concept in the interviews.

#### **Class directors and parent/guardian accountability: underrating active and divergent participation**

The interviewed CDs consider that it is their fundamental role to get parents involved in helping with the learning process, while, concurrently taking on the role of apportioning *blame* to PGs and *holding* them *accountable* for their children's academic process. In fact, some of the interviewees see their efforts to raise PGs' awareness, so that they become active members in their children's schooling, as the exclusive factor for the students' educational success or failure.

While it is true that by getting PGs involved, the CDs' actions are regarded as assistance provided by schools to families (level two of the aforementioned Epstein typology) since they are

aimed at developing favorable attitudes towards school, it is no less true that there is no redefinition of the traditional relationships between schools and families. There also seems to be, in line with what Paro (1997) has to say, a shedding of schools' responsibility as far as their role in encouraging the love of learning is concerned (cf. Sá, 2004:112-113).

As can be seen in the following extracts, although some of the CDs focus on the integration and accountability of PGs (e.g. E 7), there are others who are more inclined to apportion blame (e.g. E16):

"What is important is that parents feel they are part of their children's teaching-learning process, that they have their share of responsibility. I know that it is very easy to have this responsibility withdrawn from parents as it is usually teachers who are regarded as responsible for school work and for students' success or failure (...); Basically, it is up to the CD to make them see that, to make them feel that there is a way, that they can intervene and suggest rules" (E7).

"(...) what doesn't work in the relationship with the school is precisely the monitoring or accompanying of their children, you see, very often they don't care, don't supervise or inspect, so to speak, their work, therefore the children are left a bit to their own devices. So they just disconnect and sometimes they fail without their PGs having done anything to avoid it" (E16)

One class director goes as far as to say that PGs give up on their role as educators:

"(...) I increasingly feel that PGs give up on their role of educators and at times just drop off their children at school and expect the school to do everything" (E27)

The generalization which appears to be present in the above extract (parents/guardians = all parents/guardians) is recurrent in the teachers' narratives, with PGs' detachment from their children's school life being regarded as the most common behavior. In contrast, however, when PGs do show an interest in taking part in school life through the CD, it does not seem to be accepted by the organization. One CD even states that " (...) parents are always ready to make demands (...), point out shortcomings, find faults and criticize teachers, so it is good they see

to what extent they're fulfilling their own role, isn't it?" ( E16). In this sense, CDs show that they associate PG participation merely to asking questions to clear up any doubts they may have while any other form of involvement is regarded as interference:

"Parents have become increasingly proactive and seek to have their doubts clarified. There are also cases of parents who go beyond a harmless or naïve participation and actually meddle in school affairs, completely undermining some teachers and, in my opinion, the CD must then have an active role" (E17)

The expression "go beyond harmless or naïve participation" reveals how, in the present study, the expectations regarding PG involvement and participation are low. Such perception is reinforced by one of the CDs who considers that PGs have excessive power *within* schools themselves, as can be ascertained by her words:

"The only thing they do not have is the right to actually be in the classroom and take part in classes. As for the rest, they're entitled to everything: they can, and have the right to, see and know everything, ask for the school principal's opinion and meet with him/her if need be, so I think they have everything at their disposal, everything they need" ( E21)

Besides the fact that this type of involvement is not very well accepted, one of the CDs actually states that it has no impact whatsoever since schools and teachers do not have any significant decision-making powers in the context of school organization due to the centralized educational administration. What E8 is questioning is the point of each CD listening to their students' parents when, due to a strong administrative centralization, the schools' own members ( teachers, or management staff ) are not heard by the central authorities on each school's specific issues:

"They can always give their opinions in meetings and appointments with teachers, however, nobody is interested in putting them in practice; not even the teachers' own opinions (are heard). The same happens to the school management staff in relation to the ministerial authorities. What prevails is an

attitude by the central authorities of «doing it our own way because we are in charge and thus can do so»." (E8)

In this sense, the CD's position does not appear to provide a context for PGs to participate in and influence school decisions, instead it takes on another "very important role (...) the CD is the teachers' spokesperson", "(...) to a certain extent, he/she is the mirror of the school" (E27). As a result, there does not seem to be much space for *family-school communication*, particularly when it is permeated by content which reflects PGs' willingness to bring their *agendas* into school.

Although the CDs do make a significant effort to convey the school message, it is equally true that any PG participation within the sphere of the CD that is not regarded as fostering children's learning, defined as being the purpose of parent/guardian involvement, and is not in line with rules of conduct established in the school context is interpreted as *interference*. The difficulties facing PG participation along with the negative representations associated to it have resulted in a state of affairs which is certainly very distinct from the concept of school as an *educational community* proposed by Formosinho (1999), in which everybody (PGs and teachers) is regarded as a member of the school organization albeit with different functions. Neither is it any closer to the desired *democratic management* of schools, studied by Lima (1992), which underlies the principles set forth in the regulations governing the administration and management of schools. Even though the concept of *school as an educational community*, in which PGs are regarded as partners, has yet to be consolidated, the fact is that teachers' opinions and representations on PG participation in school show that the role the latter play in their children's schooling seems to be taking on a new shape.

#### **Class directors under pressure over the issue of academic achievement: parents / guardians as consumers**

The right parents have to choose which school to send their children to, which was briefly addressed in the first part of this article, is the feature that stands out in the definition of PGs as consumers. However, research has shown the selective nature of such possibility and how it is a pretext to increase principals' and teachers' control over schools (cf. Ball, 1995)<sup>4</sup>. In other

<sup>4</sup>Ball states that the market in education differs from most of the other markets in that it is important for the school to know *who* the client is. In his words, "What is being produced as a result is a stratified system made up of some

words, when one considers the heterogeneity of cultures present and how, according to some research (Silva, P., 2003) teachers are culturally closer to social groups belonging to a middle class possessing higher academic qualifications and, therefore, with more information resources on the schools, one has to question the opportunities available to the working classes to make an effective choice based on suitable data. Thus, what is at stake is either the issue of equal opportunities for all Portuguese citizens or, in contrast, a rise in inequalities brought about by the *cleavage*<sup>5</sup> between middle and upper classes-schools with high academic achievement levels, on the one hand, and the working classes-schools with a low academic achievement levels, on the other. In this rhetoric of parental choice, the supposed effectiveness of each school is publicized through the results obtained by their students on standardized tests, as is the case with school rankings or performance tables which are then made available to PGs as an instrument to aid them in their choice of school.

Some of the interviewed CDs pointed out that this concern about academic attainment and the school's position in the rankings is typical of the privileged social groups.

"PGs who have a higher educational background are the ones who are most concerned about this issue. The underlying factors are in the competitive society we live in. They want their children to obtain good results, the best ones, to attend a school that is in the rankings so that they are better equipped and better prepared to achieve what they want later on in life... be the best" (E9)

Other CDs not only mention PGs' concern that the school be in the rankings and in a good position at that, but also point out that academic attainment is becoming one of their major concerns:

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schools which can afford to turn away certain clients and other schools that must take any they can get. There is thus an important distinction to be made within the context of the quasi-market in education between expressing a choice and choosing" (1995:206 and 208)

<sup>5</sup> Cleavage is used here in the sense of *sociological cleavage*, as proposed by Silva (2003), which refers to the fact that as far as the school is concerned, some parents are more equal than others, since, in fact, they do not all possess the same amount of information nor the same capacity for intervention as these are unevenly distributed among the population.

"(...) academic attainment has become the 'priority'. Both students and PGs place great pressure on teachers because they question every mark given, every strategy employed. Despite all the controversy, the rankings remain a decisive factor when it comes to choosing a school" (E4)

"(...) unfortunately the PGs are only concerned about the national exam results and the school's position in the rankings" (E23)

"Bearing in mind the current context, it is obvious that it is one of the parents' concerns that their children be in one of the leading schools" (E26)

"[PGs] increasingly question the school's performance, comparing it with other schools and also comparing scores obtained by different classes (...) They ask about the exam results and how the school fared when compared to others and increasingly want to know how well other classes did" ( E27 ).

However, it should be pointed out that academic performance is just one of the aspects to consider in effective teaching and that " The political and ideological environment and particularly the pressure for accountability have constrained schools to focus essentially on the quantification of results in very specific areas" (J. Lima, 2008:366). Thus, and in line with Ballion (1991), everything relating to socialization in school and its influence on a young person's education and personal growth is difficult to measure (*ibidem*). It seems, as a result, that any other learning offered by the school, besides that which is measurable, is of lesser importance. Besides noting this almost exclusive concern over measurable results within the cognitive domain, CDs mention that, at times, there is no matching concern over the students' effective learning:

"You don't even have to wait for the national exams; I (...) am talking about the term grades. This is something which I notice has definitely got worse. They actually work out averages and then compare them with other classes. Parents do want to see the student's grade and compare it with what every other student got. This, for me, is negative competitiveness that they are passing on to their children. It is this

amount of pressure that at times makes them devalue school and disregard some subjects because they aren't there to learn, they are there to... they have to...they have to get an "A". It's all about working to get the grade." (E13)

"Parents are concerned about the results and not about their children's real knowledge. It is the results they care about, which is not the same thing and even the degree of importance each one has is clearly different. I think they should be more concerned about what their children really know than about the grade they get. But there you are, it is a situation which is typical of the society we are living in" (E18)

"Much more significance is assigned to results at the expense of knowledge, and this is passed on to the students. Whenever a teacher asks students to carry out some kind of activity it is very common for students to ask: 'Will we get a grade for it, teacher?'" (E23)

Based on the discourses of some CDs, it is clear that parents are responsible for this competitive pressure, nevertheless it is also noteworthy that the schools themselves are contributing to this *competitive ethos* in that they strategically use their students' academic achievements as an attraction factor, as mentioned by one of the interviewed CDs:

" (...) Schools are increasingly involved in a struggle to attract a higher number of students, precisely by resorting to the national exam results, their position on the rankings and the external evaluation conducted by the General Inspectorate of Education and Science" (E25).

As far as this specific issue is concerned, it should be noted that the CD's position provides a context in which PGs show their concern over both the students' academic achievement and their school's position in the rankings.

### Final Considerations

Taking into account that the CDs position provides a context in which the school-family relationship can be consolidated, this article sought to bring to light the different and

contradictory logics that permeate this relationship.

On the one hand, we were able to ascertain that the interviewed CDs made a significant effort to communicate with PGs in order to promote favourable attitudes towards school, even though schools did not seem to want to take on the responsibility to equally promote a *love of learning*.

On the other hand, there is a noticeable absence of references in the CDs' discourses to communication in the opposite direction, i.e., from families to school, nor is there a perception of the class director's position as a context in which parents/guardians may have a *participation which is active and divergent* from the teachers' and the school management's perspective.

To sum up, this piece of research seems to show a state of affairs which is still far from the concept of school as an *educational community*. As this goal has not been reached, a new role for PGs appears to be taking shape, that of *consumers*. In this context, the concerns of both PGs and schools seem to be focused on measurable results, namely academic results which are then publicized through performance tables or rankings, becoming an instrument for school choice and fostering a *competitive ethos*. Therefore the underlying issue is a "a narrow view of what types of learning and schoolexperiences are relevant, leading to a disregard for the social responsibilities of schools" (J. Lima, 2008, p.356).

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