

The critical role of class tutor in family-school partnership.

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In the Portuguese school system the class tutor is a teacher who plays a pivotal role in bridging schools and families. The purpose of this study is to describe the innovative project of school-family partnership at class level implemented by a class tutor through an entire academic year. A qualitative case study research focused on the understanding of the relationship processes and of the solutions to the problems identified was adopted in order to grasp the meanings each actor (class tutor, parents, students and class teachers) ascribed to the events and processes related to school-family partnership, while connecting those meanings to the social context in which they lived. The analytical framework was mainly constituted a priori by categories derived from the ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the framework of six types of involvement (Epstein, 1997), and the theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Sanders and Epstein, 1998), complemented by data-driven categories and particular auxiliary theories.

The findings of this study emphasized the importance of the frequency and diversity of school-family partnership activities in order to accommodate the specific needs of every family. The quality of communication and interpersonal relationships between the class tutor and parents plays a critical role in the development of trust and subsequently in partnership efficacy. Face-to-face contexts of communication are particularly effective.

Keywords: Family-school partnership, Class tutor, Interpersonal skills, Students' role, Parent meeting

Introduction

In the last few decades, Portuguese educational system has been extending mandatory schooling years, as an attempt to reduce the educational gap with more developed countries. As the technological and social evolution of society requires higher academic qualifications from all its members, schools have to take care and work with students from very heterogeneous socio economic and cultural backgrounds, displaying very different expectations on school behavior and achievement.

The increased importance assigned to the education of children and youth is associated with the growing awareness about the role family-school partnership plays in the child's personal and academic success in our school.

Unfortunately the degree of family involvement in school life remains underdeveloped, being parents from low socioeconomic or cultural minority backgrounds the most detached from school participation.

Partnership between school and family has been facing many barriers, mostly anchored in the tradition of taking them as separate worlds (Diogo, 1998). Many parents still perceive they should keep themselves out of school as they attribute to school the exclusivity of instructing their children on academic matters. Many teachers keep blaming parents for students' school problems and difficulties, and for lack of interest and cooperation with school. On the other hand, schools are not always approachable places for parents. Many parents complain about the parent-teacher conferences occurring during their work time and about the complicated language used by teachers. Significant differences between school middle-class culture and communication style and

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the culture of many low-income and minority families contribute not only to complicate student-teacher relationship but also to alienate students' families from school, and so fuelling exclusion and academic failure (Davies, 1989; Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997; Silva, 2002). Structural barriers arising from social organization and inflexible work schedules also prevent parents from coming to school. In Portugal, single parents or parents working away from school do not benefit from legal allowance for absence from work to attend school meetings or conferences. Moreover, due to its inherent inertia, school organization has not been able to cope with all the changes in society nor to open itself to take the lead in furthering family-school relationship, as should be its obligation, even if family-school collaboration must be a bilateral process evolving in a relationship between cultures (Estrela & Villas-Boas, 1997).

Detachment of families from school life is amplified by the organizational structure of middle and secondary schools, which inhibits effective and productive communication between parents and school (Sanders, Epstein & Connors-Trados, 1999). In fact, at middle and secondary school grades, students are assigned to many teachers, and each teacher is responsible for several classes and, consequently, for a large number of students. Besides that, middle and high schools have teachers educated as subject specialists and untrained to work with families (Epstein & Connors, 1997).

School transitions alter radically the kind of relationship students and families establish with schools and teachers (Epstein *et al*, 1997). In Portugal the transition from 1st-4th grades to 5th-6th grades corresponds to a transition from a single class teacher to several teachers per class. This abrupt transition, even if mitigated in the recent years by diminishing the number of teachers per class (teachers teach more than one subject), and consequently the number of students per teacher, occur at lower ages if compared with other countries (Epstein & Connors, 1997; Sanders *et al*, 1999)

Portuguese school system established the specific role of class tutor in order to warrant the coordination of all matters concerning each particular class. From the 5th grade on one teacher in each class is designated as class tutor. Functions of class tutor are numerous, being the following some of the most important: assisting each student in a more individualized way; providing the link between school/teachers, students and family; coordinating the

communication and collaborative work between teachers and students; coordinating the joint work of that class teachers; coordinating the teachers' planning and implementation of activities, contents, and strategies for the problems of the class as a whole and of individual students.

Class tutors are in a position to establish privileged relationships with individual students and families. They have time allocated to take care of class-related issues, and to communicate with students and families, doing that in a more personalized way. In this way, the class tutor can compensate for a more rational, transitory, impersonal, and cognitive focused teacher-student relationship, by nurturing a more personalized, emotional, and affective focused relationship (Silva, 1994).

The purpose of this study is to describe both in detail and depth the innovative project of school-family partnership at class level implemented by a class tutor, in a Portuguese school, through an entire academic year.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is mainly informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development; Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, and Epstein's (1997) framework of six types of involvement.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development provides a useful framework for understanding the interaction between the primary settings, namely family and school, where children spend most of their time, and how this interaction affects the development of the children. Bronfenbrenner's theory postulates that the number and quality of the connections between the settings in which a young child spends time have important implications for his development. Also the concept of ecological transition has been particularly useful in this study. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), "an ecological transition occurs whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as a result of a change in role, setting, or both" (p. 26). Transition from low elementary to upper elementary schools is both an expected, predictable, and desired transition as well as an abrupt discontinuity in roles and setting, a risky and critical period, a potential turning point in a positive or in a negative sense (Seidman & French, 2004).

In her theory of overlapping spheres of influence, Epstein (1995) posits that school, family, and community share the common purpose of the educational success of children, and have the power to affect directly students' learning and development. They can and they do it either jointly or separately. However, if there is communication and collaboration between those spheres, partnership programs and activities can be designed to help and motivate students to attain academic and educational success. The overlapping of messages and the congruence of efforts among school, family, and community are desirable and needed. However, each of those spheres keeps on preserving its uniqueness, specific role, particular perspective and interests. Thus it is important to have in mind that overlapping can never be total, and family, school and community, while working in collaboration, must respect the particular space of each other. Congruence calls both for personnel interaction, as well as for complementarity, taking different but not contradictory responsibilities, tasks, and strategies.

Epstein's framework of six types of involvement is helpful to examine the richness, scope and diversity of the relationships between school and families. For each type of involvement, Epstein's model puts forward a definition and a sample of practices; key challenges for developing that type; a redefinition of the core concepts in order to deepen or broaden the quality of involvement in that type; and, finally, the expected results of that involvement for students, for parents, for teaching practice, and for school climate (Epstein, 1997).

The theoretical framework of the study is also informed by Ivey's (Ivey, 1983; Ivey & Gluckstern, 1977) microcounselling model, Perrenoud's (1995) perspective about the role students play in school-family communication, and Adams & Christenson's (2000) developmental progression of trust.

Ivey's microcounselling model is designed to help counsellors on how to improve their interpersonal attending and communication skills, specially how to cope with different and difficult communication situations and attendants. The model stresses cultural sensitivity and awareness, empathy, and intentionality in listening and responding by using the most suitable attending skills (Ivey, 1983; Ivey & Gluckstern, 1977).

According to Perrenoud (1995), the role that students play in school-family communication is never neutral or non-existent. Students are, in his terms, "go between", always coming and going between two worlds – family and school. Even unintentionally, students typically act as selective and active messengers, introducing ambiguity and conditioning parents' or teachers' perceptions of the other "world".

Adams and Christenson (2000) consider that trust is critical to develop collaborative relationships between family and school. The authors present trust as a developmental progression consisting of three hierarchical levels: predictability, dependability, and faith. Frequency and chiefly quality (i.e. parents' satisfaction) of class tutor and parents formal and informal interactions are key predictors of trust progression.

Methods

Case study design

A single case study approach was used for the present study. The case was constituted by the work of one class tutor with the students of her class and with their families during an entire school year. This case study is interested in grasping how the class tutor, students and parents make sense of the events and processes related to school-family partnership, while connecting those meanings to the social context in which they live. The object of study was focused on the conceptions, expectations, and perceptions that the class tutor, students, and parents have concerning the aims, processes and changes of the class tutor work, of the school-family partnership, and of the individual students and the whole class development.

The school that constitutes the environment for this case is a large 5th to 9th grade-public school, attended by 1260 students, located in a city by the sea, near Porto, the most important city in the north of Portugal. Students' families belonged to different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, with predominance of low to medium levels. Being the immigration level very low in the area, there was not a significant ethnical diversity. The school did not have a consistent parental involvement policy, which was considered to be a class tutor's responsibility.

Diana - pseudonym of a 47-year-old Physical Education teacher, married, mother of a 14-year-old girl, 19 years of teaching experience, and 13 years of class tutor experience - was the class tutor elected for this case study. Selection criteria adhere to Yin (1993) recommendations: criticality for the theories being tested, topical relevance, and feasibility and access. Diana was highly considered by peers who acknowledged the work she developed with students' families and kept electing her for the coordination of class tutors since 1996. Diana's 6th grade class was composed of 27 ethnically homogeneous students, 17 boys and 10 girls, ages ranging from 10-14 years old. The majority of the students had belonged to the same class the preceding year, with Diana as class tutor. Five students were repeating the 6th grade. Parents were predominantly of low to medium socio-economic status, and low educational level. Five students received social assistance support.

Data collection

Case study intends to illuminate the understanding of the phenomenon under study, not to generalize to populations. It requires the gathering of detailed information from a wide variety of sources as well as the acknowledgement of contextual particularities of events and processes (Merriam, 2001).

Data concerning the work developed by Diana and its underlying conceptions were collected through direct observation field notes of meetings; through interviews with the class tutor, students, parents, and teachers; through a class tutor's journal; through pre and post-evaluation questionnaires for students and parents; and through other significant documents.

Data analysis

Data from interviews, field codes, Diana's journal, and other textual material were processed verbatim and introduced into the QSR Nvivo2 software that assisted the codification and qualitative data analysis.

The analytical framework used was mainly constituted a priori by categories derived from the ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the framework of six types of involvement (Epstein, 1997) and the theory of overlapping spheres of influence

(Epstein, 1995), complemented by data-driven categories and particular auxiliary theories (see Table 1).

Data codified at nodes were summarized, tabulated, and scrutinized for special relevant quotes. Tentative findings, patterns and explanations were subject to active falsification by looking for negative cases or disconfirming evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Questionnaires and other quantifiable data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and frequencies.

Synthesis of findings and conclusion

The findings of this study emphasized the importance of the quality, frequency and diversity of school-family partnership activities in order to accommodate the specific needs of every family. The quality of communication and interpersonal relationships between the class tutor and parents plays a critical role in the development of trust and subsequently in partnership efficacy. Face-to-face contexts of communication, namely parents' meetings and parent-class tutor conferences, are particularly effective. Under the leadership of the class tutor, class parents' meetings provide opportunity for all partakers in the educational process (class tutor and parents and, at times, students and teachers) to express and confront their views and expectations; agree on goals and strategies; and articulate energies to achieve them. The context of class direction offers the class tutor a privileged endeavour to help parents acquire knowledge and skills, or adopt supportive behaviors that facilitate their children's academic accomplishment.

Students, in an unconscious or deliberate manner, may exert a strong influence in the quality of school-family relationship, either by fostering or undermining the development of partnership, in accordance to their affects and perceptions of the gains they might obtain. The awareness of the students' role in school-family communication brings the class tutor new ways of intervention to facilitate family-school partnership.

Table 1.
Example of Coding Framework

1. <i>Database</i>	1.1. Subjects	1.1.1. Teachers 1.1.2. Parents 1.1.3. Class tutor	1.1.4. Students 1.1.5. Class teachers' council
	1.2. Documents	1.2.1. Direct observation 1.2.2. Interviews 1.2.3. Meetings Minutes	1.2.4. Legislation 1.2.5. Letters 1.2.6. Class tutor's journal
2. <i>Class characterization</i>			
3. <i>School-family partnership</i>	3.1. Types of involvement	3.5. Adherence and negotiation	
	3.2. Obstacles	3.6. "go between"	
	3.3. Benefits	3.7. Work exhibition	
	3.4. Helpers	3.8. Parents' roles	
4. <i>Communication and relationships</i>	4.1. Contexts	4.1.1. Parents' meetings	4.1.4. Phone calls
		4.1.2. Conferences with parents	4.1.5. Class teachers' council
		4.1.3. Letters	
	4.2. Climate		
4.3. Interpersonal skills			
4.4. Communication and relationships			
5. <i>Conceptions</i>			
6. <i>References</i>	6.1. Teachers	6.6. School	
	6.2. Parents	6.7. School board	
	6.3. Class tutor	6.8. Parents association	
	6.4. Students	6.9. Parents' delegate	
	6.5. Class teachers' council	6.10. Community	
7. <i>Problems</i>	7.1. Problem areas	7.1.1. Integration	7.1.5. Learning
		7.1.2. English learning	7.1.6. Study attitudes and habits
		7.1.3. Attendance	7.1.7. Others
7.1.4. Behaviour			
7.2. Problem solving Strategies			
7.3. Results			
8. <i>Class tutor</i>	8.1. Class tutor's roles	8.1.1. Students	8.1.3. Parents
		8.1.2. Teachers	8.1.4. Other functions
	8.2. Profile		
8.3. Evaluation			

Assertion 1:

The class tutor has a pivotal role in school-family partnership, since she is the visible face of school, because it is her responsibility to assure communication between parents and the other teachers, and allow for an individualized assistance for every student. The way she performs these functions can contribute to bring parents to

school, enhance their trust in school and involve them in a collaborative relationship

Diana evidences a great awareness of the obstacles that usually keep parents away from school and she tries to facilitate communication and collaboration with the families. She believes that the class tutor must "be especially careful

with the interpersonal relationships with parents" and that she must "make them aware that they have someone (the class tutor) permanently watching over their children". She recognizes that "when parents are called to school, many of them think that there are problems with their children, and they are not able to face those problems, because their life is already too difficult." In order to bring parents to school and to establish a frequent and collaborative relationship she assumes the importance of using different means and opportunities of communication, and of creating a friendly and trustful climate. She is particularly focused on preventing academic failure and stresses the cooperation between students, teachers, and families to reach that goal.

In this class, along the year, there were eleven students with academic difficulties. The teachers identified the problems and the strategies, and the class tutor debated those problems with each particular student and his/her family and, together, defined strategies for the students and for the parents. This collaboration between the families and school to help each student was successful in seven cases, since those students managed to overcome their difficulties.

The importance of the caring role of the class tutor over children is postulated by Silva (1994), who defines some differences between teacher-student and class tutor-student relationships, due to his/her responsibility to provide each child an individualized support and to establish relationships with the family, and ascribes the class tutor the possibility of knowing students in a more individualized way, making the link between the child-element of a family and the child-element of a class.

Diana is successful in her effort to overcome the obstacles that maintain parents away from school. Only one parent never went to school during the whole year. Parents came regularly and collaborated with teachers. One claimed that this happened because of "the way the class tutor motivates us to be close to our children; the way she captivated us; the way she conveys information; the way she cares about our children. And so, she persuades us to come to school." Parents are aware of Diana's commitment to help their children and they are willing to help, "She is so committed to help the kids! I think that the best way to reach the parents is the way you treat our children, isn't it?"

Assertion 2:

Trust of family in school constitutes a critical variable for the viability of a collaborative relationship between school and family. It is strengthened through face-to-face interaction (parent-class tutor conferences and parents meetings) and depends on the quality of communication and interpersonal relations. It is enhanced by the feeling that children are safe and well supervised at school. Trust positively influences the parents' perceptions about school and their attitudes and behavior concerning their children education.

This conception is espoused by Diana who considers crucial that the class tutor, "besides being a teacher, should also be a trusted friend the students can always count on, and should care about the quality of the relationships with the parents, trying to show them that they have someone they can trust always looking after their children at school". She tries to be a significant person to the students and she sometimes calls herself "the mum they need at school". She believes that the good performance of class tutor's function of assisting each student in a more individualized way is crucial to enhance trust of parents in school and, consequently, family-school collaboration. Furthermore, she is very persistent in performing her functions and in helping to solve the students' problems, "I don't relax before solving the problems. And when people perceive this, they feel trust."

The feeling of safety is reported by parents, who also testify their trust in the class tutor: "When we report a problem, she goes to the bottom of it. She wants to find out the causes and always gives us an answer", "She conveys a feeling of safety and security when she says, «I'll try to solve the problem.» And we notice that she really works hard to accomplish it." These statements evidence trust in the sense defined by Adams and Christenson (2000).

Being a significant person to their students and having parents aware of that makes them trust her, contributes to overcome the structural discontinuity between family and school underlined by Silva (1994) and Diogo (1998), and to placate the ecological transition between the two contexts, defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Assertion 3:

Class tutor-parent conferences are privileged occasions to strengthen trust between parents and class tutor and improve family-school collaboration.

Although Diana uses different means of communication with the parents, she prefers the class tutor-parent conferences, "because it is in such a conference that I have the opportunity to talk face-to-face, look at people in the eyes, and try to create an environment where people feel they can talk openly about their problems, that they can trust me, and that I'll keep our conversation confidential, and I'll try to help solving the problems."

Diana states that during a conference with a parent her main concern is listening: "I listen a lot. I try to listen exactly to what is told. And I try to understand what people really want from me, and that, sometimes, is not explicitly said. And I try to acknowledge the parent's interests or needs." She also claims the importance of adjusting her way of communicating to the characteristics of the person she is attending.

Diana ascribes a pivotal role to the class tutor-parent conferences in the development of trust between family and school, being the quality of the communication established the first step to reach that purpose. Several studies support her approach: Adams and Christenson (2000) state that "Trust in the family-school relationship [...] is considered the first step in creating collaborative relationships between families and schools for children's learning and development" (p. 483). Their study, even acknowledging the importance of frequency of parent-teacher interactions, found that the nature of those interactions is a better predictor of trust. Leung and Yuen's (2001) study about parent-teacher conferences also points the building of mutual trust as the most important conferencing skill, naming active listening as a very useful skill for the conferences. The attending behavior defined by Ivey (1983), namely some of the attending skills, is evident in Diana's description of her conferences with the parents. The active listening and the reflection of feeling are some of the attending skills she claims to praise and use and there is a clear intentionality in the way she leads the conferences. Also Zins and Ponti's (1996) conception of the parent-teacher conferences as opportunities for parents and teachers to cooperate in processes to prevent or solve problems to enhance students' well-being

and performance is perceptible in Diana's own conception.

Data corroborate that Diana's purposes for parent-class tutor conferences were achieved. Parents specially praise Diana's confidentiality, understandable language, interest in helping the students and her commitment to solving their problems. Some of them state: "I like individual parent-class tutor conferences very much, because I don't like other people to know about my son's problems", "Our class tutor talks to us in a way very easy to understand", "If we have a problem and we come to school she always attends us, even when she's having lunch. She's always receptive and welcoming", "This class tutor, we could see that she really was interested in helping our son", "With this class tutor, I always managed to have my problems solved."

Assertion 4:

Parents meetings are important to make deeper the sense of partnership, and to reinforce the process of collaboration between all participants in the educational process (students, class tutor, teachers, and parents).

The six types of involvement school-family-community defined by Epstein (1997) were present in the parents' meetings, contributing to overlap those spheres of influence and to promote continuity between school and family messages about the importance of school and study. The parents' meetings promoted the growing of trust, that Adams and Christenson (2000) state to enhance the resolution of difficult situations and contribute to the educational success of the students.

In Portuguese schools, usually not many parents attend parents' meetings. Diana, who was aware of the obstacles that kept them away from school, used many strategies to bring them to the meetings. Her meetings always had meaningful contents and accomplished several tasks and purposes, such as: sharing of information; promoting parents' education; exhibiting students' work; analyzing and reflecting about class problems, setting intervention strategies, evaluating and updating strategies implementation. The exhibition of students' work played a very important role, since both students and parents wished to be present, and the students with more reluctant parents performed an active role in persuading them.

The friendly and trustful environment created enhanced the treatment of different themes and problems. Furthermore, that trustful environment was intentionally promoted by Diana, who assured the parents she would never use those meetings to the treatment of individual students or parents' problems. In that way, the kind of information presented in parents' meetings differs from that conveyed in parent-class tutor conferences. Diana states that, "In parents' meetings I never refer myself to a particular student." She also claims to be very careful in monitoring her verbal and non-verbal language according to the parents' characteristics. Parents and students praise these skills of the class tutor. A student considers that "it wouldn't be good to talk about particular students, because some parents could be ashamed". Another one goes further and says that in other classes some parents miss the meetings "because their children don't behave in classes and they are afraid to go to the meetings and listen to that information". A mother reports that Diana "tries to be very discreet. Once she told there were some students with academic success problems. She never said their names and she didn't even look at them. I think this is correct. I admire her discreetness."

In Portugal, usually only the class tutor is present in the meetings with the parents. Diana not only invited the students, but she sometimes also invited the other teachers. Most of them were present in the students' work exhibitions, in the parties or in the debates, making possible informal contacts with the parents and the building of mutual trust. A parent states: "I think these meetings and parties are very nice and useful, because we can be closer to the teachers. It is important to talk to them and to know them better. Like this, we can understand better the things our children tell about them at home and have an idea if they are true or not."

Diana watches carefully over the management details of the meetings: "I try to create a pleasant environment. This is very important. During the whole meeting I always have a purpose in mind: to do everything in my power to create a climate for people to talk openly and not to feel afraid of raising a problem.", "I'm very careful in the way how I present information. I try to manage the time in order to give everyone time to talk."

Parents appreciate Diana's neutrality in conflict resolution: "She listens attentively to the parents' opinions relating to a teacher, for example, and that is very important. She's not a

partial person. It's something I admire. First she tries to know the parents' side, then the teacher's side, and only then she gives her opinion."

Results of the parents' questionnaires revealed high levels of parental satisfaction with the meetings content and climate, with no dissatisfaction rating being reported. On the other hand, the number of parents attending each meeting varied from 19 to 25 out of 27 parents.

These meetings had some common characteristics: the presence of parents and children, sharing of ideas, debating, using written or visual materials and/or providing them to take home. The results point these characteristics, along with the friendly environment of the group, as important variables to the meetings efficiency.

Assertion 5:

The participation of students in parents meetings is advantageous. They become more aware of the collaboration between their family and school, which promotes the acquisition and consolidation of values, conceptions and attitudes favorable to learning. It also triggers interaction between parents and children which enhances joint responsibility and further interaction at home.

Diana refers that, "in a meeting with parents and students everyone is there. Everyone who is interested in the children success is there and the most interested are the children. So, if you wish to promote continuity between school and family, school-family collaboration, the presence of the students in the meetings is very important."

Students were present in almost every parents' meetings, taking part in the debate of themes such as learning strategies at home, or taking part in the class problems analysis and in the definition of solution strategies, assuming the responsibility for developing those ascribed to themselves. The presence of students in the meetings allows for the continuity of the debates initiated in those meetings and encourages the application of the strategies suggested by invited specialists, teachers, or other parents (Zenhás, 2006).

Some meetings included students' exhibitions followed by informal dinner parties, involving students, families and teachers. Students compel their parents to be present, as Diana reports: "One mother told me that her son had phoned her before the meeting asking her not

to miss it" and, talking about the presentation of students' work in meetings, she adds: "Kids are proud of showing their work to their parents; parents are proud of seeing their children's work. The kids themselves ask the parents to come to the meetings and they phone them not to forget it." The friendly climate of these exhibitions and parties, the absence of negative or individual approaches in the debates, and the work Diana did with the class before each parents' meeting motivated the students to be present, although this is not a common feature of Portuguese parents' meetings at school.

Data from interviews of parents and students acknowledged the increment of students' motivation, responsibility, and perception of the collaboration between parents and school. Some parents state: "the fact that he is present at the meeting allows us to talk about everything afterwards at home", "one advantage was that my son used to have breakfast and then he didn't eat anything else until lunch time. Now, as he heard the doctor say we shouldn't be more than three hours without eating, he takes a snack to school to eat in the middle of the morning." Some students report some positive changes in their attitudes and habits, supported by their parents, "Before I used to study with the television on, but now I sit at a desk and the television is off", "Now many students stopped eating junk food and they have lunch at the school canteen."

Data from questionnaires confirm the benefits of the students' participation in the meetings. All the parents and students evaluate the meetings positively, with most of parents (82.6%) and students (66.7%) considering these meetings very useful. The number of students attending each meeting varied from 21 to 25 out of 27 students.

Diana posits that students can help bringing their parents to school if they understand that they will not experience bad consequences, and that, on the contrary, it will be helpful and pleasant to them. Whereas the class tutor considers, such as Perrenoud (1995), that the student can be a referee of the relationships between parents and teachers, she uses different strategies with the common purpose of fostering students' positive perceptions towards their parents coming to school. Also Epstein (1997) claims that students are crucial to the success of school, family, and community partnerships, as long as they often are the main source of information their parents have about school.

Assertion 6:

The class tutor role has enormous potential to put into practice an effective parents' education inspired on Epstein's six types of involvement.

Diana considers parents' education one of her main functions to enhance school-family collaboration in order to promote the educational and academic success of the students. Yet, she remarks that she does not intend to use her institutional role to "teach" adults, by putting them in a subordinated position. She prefers a "sharing experiences" stance, assuming that she also "learns a lot with the parents".

Meetings about themes important to develop parental skills and subsequent monitoring by the class tutor are important strategies to help the families improve their support to their children at school (Zenhás, 2006). Parent-class tutor conferences, student-class tutor conversations, parent-class tutor phone calls or messages are some of the monitoring strategies that Diana used.

Parenting (Epstein's type 1), with emphasis on basic rules concerning food and sleep habits, was a frequent visited topic. Different strategies were used along the school year, namely the presentation of the results of a questionnaire about students habits; and a debate on health and academic success, with the presence of a public health physician.

Learning at home (Epstein's type 4) was treated in every meeting. Diana helped the families to adopt more effective strategies to assist their children with school motivation and homework. Diana encouraged parents to share their experiences and to collect some ideas. She never accommodated to parents' helpless statements: "My conception is a far broader one. Every parent can help creating good environmental conditions, promoting study habits and schedules, talking about school, congratulating for a work well done or a success." This conception is sustained by many authors as well, such as Epstein and Connors (1994), Zenhás, Silva, Januário, Malafaya and Portugal (2002). According to Bloom (1981), the quality of the family environment as a learning environment depends more on the activities that parents do with their children than on their socioeconomic or cultural level. McDermott and Rothenberg (2000) study concluded that the parental feelings of efficacy contribute to their involvement in school.

Villas-Boas (2001), on her turn, points parents' education as a way to influence changeable factors of the family environment to make it more able to enhance the children learning.

Conclusion

In the Portuguese school system, the class tutor is in a privileged situation to play a pivotal role in the enhancement of the relationship between school and families. It is his/her duty to care for a specific class and each one of its students individually considered. It is his/her goal to promote students' educational and academic success.

As the bureaucratization severely limits the class tutor's potential, an effective role performance claims for cultural sensitivity, belief in the importance of family involvement in school, and personal commitment to a family-school partnership project.

Findings of this study corroborate that the frequency, quality, and diversity of school-family activities, along with the quality of communication, and interpersonal relationships between the class tutor and the parents play a crucial role in the development of trust and, consequently, in the partnership efficacy.

Face-to-face contexts of communication showed to be particularly effective. The class tutor's cultural awareness and interpersonal communication skills can contribute to enhance parents' trust and strengthen the partnership. Parents' meetings and parent-class tutor conferences have different purposes, although they can, and many times should, be complementary.

Students demonstrated to be a key factor in attracting parents to school, as long as they perceive that as beneficial and rewarding.

A major conclusion of this study is the positive contribute the class tutor may have in parental education, and in the accomplishment of a more constructive family-school relationship.

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