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Family-school cooperation in the context of inclusion of children with special educational needs

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Abstract

Although current legislative measures recognize parents participation in school life, several difficulties remain and many barriers need to be broken down as there are still uncomfortable situations to be dealt with between school and parents. In this context, the aim of this study is to identify and to interpret parents, teachers and students' opinions concerning parental involvement and participation in their children's school life. This study was carried out in an interpretative and descriptive paradigm which involves children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), their families and the relationship between them and the schools their children are attending. It is a exploratory, cross-sectional study, with convenience sample of 119 parents, 22 kindergarten teachers and teachers and 168 students attending a school situated in a rural area in the interior centre of Portugal. The four instruments used were adapted from Zenhas, A. (2006) and Dias, J. (1999). The results were analyzed through a descriptive statistics program, SPSS 19.0, which allowed us to discover that parents' participation in their children's school life is still very incipient. The conclusion that it is up to school to assume a relevant role in coordinating with the families, to outline the objectives of the intervention and which strategies should be adopted to enable the increasing level of participation of families and implement policy measures where all stakeholders (parents, students with special educational needs and teachers) feel more included.

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1. Introduction:

Given the profound changes that schooling has undergone in recent decades – the growing burden of schooling and teachers, who are increasingly saddled with assignments of a social nature, and the enormous diversity that inhabits today's school – reflecting on family-school collaboration is reflecting on an important timely question.

Reflecting on family-school collaboration is to remember that the family is the first institution to be responsible for educating children. The family is the first place for all education; however, with the precipitous changes that have taken place in society, families delegate many of their traditional functions to schools. Hence, schools increasingly feel the need to bring the family into school life.

In recent years, several researchers have been examining the issue of the relationship between school and the family. The involvement of families in school has been found to be positively related to students' educational success and the inclusion of those with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Bronfenbrenner (1979, cited by Villas-Boas, 2001) emphasizes the emergence and importance of an ecological relationship between the school, family and the environment in the sense that human development is naturally dynamic, made of ebbs and flows involving a continuous number of transitions. In this same vein, Pedro, Villas-Boas and Fonseca (2000) state that "...school, the family and the community are three prevailing contexts in the student's world and that the school/family/community partnership can be a powerful tool for improving the quality of learning, the school's image and promoting social life" (p.7). Appreciation of closer relations between the school and the family is praised by Villas-Boas (2001), who believes that parental involvement in children's education has been granted great theoretical and practical importance in the context of the child's cognitive development and their school performance.

Reflecting on the school-family relationship means becoming aware of cultural diversity, experiences, values and feelings of all stakeholders involved in education. To reflect on this problem is to think about different cultures: school culture and family culture, including the families belonging to different social groups. The school-family relationship can be understood as relations between parents and children about schooling, or the parents' contact with the school or with teachers. Legislation provides parents involvement in school. In Waller and Parsons' opinion (cited by Silva, 2003), the school and the family are institutions with "different ends, objectives and activities" (p.91), exerting separate influences on children. Like other authors, Villas-Boas (2001) also says that teachers consider that many of the problems students face in school stem from the home environment and parents often step down from their role as educators.

Cultural discontinuity between the family context and the school context may be a factor contributing to distance, conflict and tension between these two institutions. However, the school and the teachers cannot enclose themselves in a school culture. They have to show openness to the culture of the students and their families.

For Zenhas (2006, p. 34, citing Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997 and Davies, 1989), "the differences of language and culture between the school and the disadvantaged classes, from a socio-economic perspective, are a factor of exclusion and a barrier to parental involvement in school". The school requests the same thing from all parents, but not all parents can give the same response to these requests. And if families do not have the school's language, what world will talk about?

The school, which owns the "linguistic capital" and the "cultural capital", should be the one to take the first step towards families, so that parents will find fewer barriers to their participation and become active members and the educational community. The school must build bridges between such different worlds and realities. Only thus can it be an inclusive school that welcomes difference: differences of diverse cultures, knowledge and children, often with SEN. This rapprochement between the school and the family, which encourages parental involvement "cannot be achieved only by decree, but through strategies with the aim of experiencing partnerships" (Villas-Boas, 2008, p.57).

Given that in today's society the definition of the roles and functions of both the school and the family is neither clear nor consensual. From Epstein's (Epstein & Sanders, 1998, cited by Villas-Boas, 2001) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, we can state that the important common objectives of the school, family and community can

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