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Interview – Apple on the Tree Booklet
with Ana Paula Silva

What do you think is currently working well regarding collaboration between families and institutions?

The family and school are two of the pillars of human development. Schools and families should work together to contribute to a fuller development of the child in terms of education and socialization. In other words, the school is committed to educating students, providing them with favorable conditions for healthy development; but to carry out its role effectively, the support of the family is necessary. Both share responsibilities in the education of future adults.

Why, then, is there no collaboration as full as desirable? Sometimes parents don't participate because they don't know how and, on the other hand, there are also schools that don't encourage them to do it. Blame is divided and problems remain.

Nevertheless, there are cases in which this collaboration is almost satisfactory for both parties, with a positive impact on students in terms of integration, attendance, participation, and quality of learning. In these cases, there is a closeness between the school and the family, which allows for the creation of bonds, resulting from the going of the school to the community and families to school. With this approximation between school and family, the opportunity is created for both to get to know each other better, reciprocally, and, consequently, to identify ways and means of collaboration that will have a positive impact on the development of students.

What do you think would be its ideal operation?

Families and schools should have a relationship of parity and reciprocity regarding the human development of students.

This does not happen in many contexts, especially in disadvantaged socio-economic contexts. Schools, inserted in these contexts, often develop a relationship of contempt in relation to the families, which impedes communication and rapprochement, maintaining the cultural distance between them and mutual misunderstanding. Generally, when families are called to school, in these contexts, it is to be informed that their students are not behaving properly, nor are they succeeding at school. Consequently, families do not feel comfortable at school and do not feel like going there, as it is a place that gives them back a negative image of themselves, and of inadequacy.

Ideally, then, the school, an eventual locus of greater scientific, technical, and pedagogical knowledge, should take the initiative to seek an intelligent and sensitive approach to families, seeking to know and understand the culture (ideas and values, anxieties, and fears,

expectations, etc.) of the families to whom the school education service is provided, regardless of their socioeconomic conditions. For this, the school should be open to families, inviting them to participate in various activities at the school, to give suggestions and helping to improve practices, being involved in decision-making at every possible levels.

What should be done about this? What would be needed?

Despite the school's management model in Portugal comprises parents' representatives in the composition of the highest body of the school, the General Council, it appears that this is not enough. There are studies that have verified that these elements of the General Council do not actually represent the interests of the generality of families that the school serves, but their own interests and those of their own children.

One way to overcome this situation would be, both on the part of the Ministry of Education (ME), creating incentives for families to participate in other ways in schools, as well as on the part of employers, namely the waiver of labor functions, in periods when the Families get involved in school, throughout the school life of children and adolescents.

What does inclusion mean to you? Please mention 3 keywords, if possible. Why is it important to talk about cooperation between families and institutions in relation to inclusion?

Inclusion is an ideal, a horizon to reach. In school education, it means that one day the school will make each and every student learn the most of school knowledge, activating their abilities and potential, in order to become an integrated, participative, productive, creative, accepted and valued citizen in the society to which belongs, regardless of hers/his limitations.

For this purpose, it is necessary for the school to value the cultural roots and individual characteristics of each student, in a global schooling process. Thus, inclusion means valuing what each one is and can give to the other, to society, always valuing this gift, however small and difficult to achieve.

So, inclusion 3 key words would be: respecting the different; want to know and understand the diverse; and value diversity as a source of richness.

What new communication channels and forums have you become aware in recent years to facilitate contact with families, has there been any positive outcome?

All Portuguese schools have a computerized school management system that is used both by teachers in their day-to-day practices, including summaries recording, student attendance,

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assessments, etc., as well as by the school's management and from which, information about the school life of all students is sent to their families, either via e-mail or through a mobile application. On the other hand, the school calendar requires regular scheduling of meetings with families, either calling the families of each of the classes, for collective or individual meetings, according to the needs revealed by each student.

Despite this organization, these resources and this modus operandi, the relationship between schools and families has proved to be insufficient. For this reason, some schools have been strengthening this relationship through awareness-raising sessions on a wide range of subjects, informal get-togethers, creation of newsletters and newspapers, always in an effort to approach and value the culture of families. In many cases, particularly in disadvantaged socio-economic contexts, the role of the social mediator has proved to be crucial (resource negotiated with the ME, within the scope of TEIP projects - [see cases of good inclusion practices in Portugal](#)), especially when this function is performed by a person from the community, to which the school serves. This mediator has precisely the function of bringing the school and families together, serving as an interpreter between them, reciprocally translating languages, expectations, and values.

When presenting the various good practices in the STAIRS project that promote inclusion, it was prominent that the relationship between families and the institution, nurturing that relationship, making meeting points more frequent, making communication more effective was a recurring endeavour. In our opinion, why is the relationship between families and the institution so central concerning the realisation of inclusion?

For all the reasons already presented in the previous answers. I can, however, take advantage of this space to underline the universality of the inclusion policy, within the current framework of education policies in Portugal. The law in force, Decree-Law No. 54 of July 2018, considers that any student may reveal a learning disability at any time during their school course. Thus, in all schools, there is a multidisciplinary team, composed of permanent members (special education teacher, psychologist, pedagogical director...) and occasional members (the student's teacher(s), other technicians being identified as necessary), that analyze any situation that is presented to them and propose measures to overcome the difficulties revealed by the student, which may range from measures to reinforce learning, curriculum and assessment adaptations to individualized plans. These measures must be promulgated by the Director of the school that guarantees the access of students to all measures defined to overcome learning difficulties. Families are made aware of the process, at all stages of its progress, and must give their approval for the measures to be implemented, being involved in the implementation process and participating in evaluating the outcomes.

For learners with special educational needs and disabilities; integration, learning and behavioural difficulties; disadvantages or cumulative disadvanatges – what is the significance and reality of this endeavour? Is it more important than for the" average"? Why (not)?

The advantages of an articulation between school and family will be fundamental, because children with learning difficulties need even more than others to reinforce learning, that is, to practice what they learn in different contexts, they need to feel the meaning of learning . And, sometimes, the school has limitations in the development of learning (more functional learning), and it is here, mainly, that the family or other extra-school contexts, in which children are involved, enter. In students with severe learning difficulties, care must always be taken to transfer learning to other contexts, where they have opportunities to practice. This is because these students not only have more difficulty in learning, but also more easily forget what they learn and, in this way, the fact that they can practice and experience the same in different contexts, allows for greater consolidation of learning. For example, when they learn the money system at school, they do simulated buying and selling situations, using paper bills and coins, and even dramatizing buying and selling situations.

When parents are aware of what they do at school and follow the tasks, they can create effective situations in the real context and put into action something they have learned, namely going to the cafe to buy a cake, receive change, count the coins. This will be a determining aspect, when we think about the articulation between school and family.

In the case of children and young people with significant curricular adjustments whose learning is far from the common curriculum, the family also has to inform the school about what it values and what it wants its student to learn, know how to do and know how to behave. Although this situation still occurs in families that are more effectively involved in student learning, it is up to the school to trigger procedures that allow the family to realize its importance in student learning, considering learning in a global way, something that is not just of the responsibility of the school, but of all the contexts in which the child is involved.

When families are asked to help build the educational program, they are able to see the importance they have in the progress of their students and become more involved and, consequently, demand more from them. When the family realizes the importance it has in the progress of their students, they help them to go further. In this aspect, the school has a fundamental role in the involvement of the family, but it is recognized that there is still a lot to be done.

During the collection of good practices, was there a difference in the relationship between families and the institution in terms of the age of the learners?

Families get to be less and less involved as pupils' age and school grade increases.

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What good practices would you highlight in the VET sector regarding this topic?

Those of [Escola Secundária Ferreira Dias](#).

Which of the good practices collected for STAIRS would you highlight and why?

The one mentioned in the previous response because that school's VET offer is defined upon consultation of the people to which the school provides educational service. Within the school a psychologist implements vocational guidance to the students, checking which course suits best each student profile and expectations. Along the development of the courses, teachers opt for adequate teaching practices to the students' learning profiles and interests.

What do you think can make the adaptation of good practice successful? What are the conditions for this? What is needed? Who hold key roles in this process?

The adaptation of a good practice can only be made successful with the involvement of the practitioners, which can be easier achieved if the good practice come to solve a problem felt and identified by them. The good practice must be significant meaningful for practitioners, i.e. it must meet the practioners' professional needs. Thus, who have decided to adopt a good practice must present it to the practitioners in a way so that it can reach the practiotioners understanding as a solution for a problem they are facing/strugling with for a while. Direct practitioners' leaders and coworkers „early initiators" hold key roles in the process.

How long do you think change and tangible results take in practice?

Literature points out to 3-5 years for having a change in education in place moving forward.

How can those involved be sensitised? How can the right dialogue and cooperation be established, especially with regard to parents?

All parents wish the best for their children. Hence, those responsible for the adaptation of any good practice must make parents realize how the new practice come to benefit their children.
Other policy reform projects highlighted that the success of change in the education sector is influenced by three main factors: quality of the trust among stakeholders, allocating enough time to let change happen and capacity building

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I think that those three factors are indeed relevant and the progress the Portuguese educational system underwent along the last decades reveals exactly that, besides contextual and historical specificities of course.

Regarding the "quality of the trust among stakeholders" the examples provided by the Portuguese good practices significantly highlighted that as in the case of Santo António Cluster of Schools as in the one of José Saramago Two very different contexts (urban versus rural) with diverse approaches to stakeholders, but in both cases, trust was built upon open communication and the strengthening of bonds between the schools and the communities to which schooling service was provided.

About the need of "allocating enough time to let change happen" the progress registered in Portugal turn that also evident. I give some concrete examples ahead in my last answer to this interview.

Addressing the third feature mentioned in your question, i.e., "capacity building of leaders", I would like to start calling the attention to the neoliberal ideology underpinning such a "leadershipism" view. I think that "capacity building" is a pressing need upon all professionals in education, mainly the teacher. Nowadays, in such an accelerated, fluid, and globalized world, a lot of pressure is exerted upon school, which demands to professionals in education to be permanently reinforcing their capacity both as human beings and as professionals. Studies also prove that what really makes a difference, an impact on students learning is the quality of teaching practices. Even at the level of the relationship between school and families. Teachers must be open to families' specificities, however divergent the culture of the family from the one of the school is. So, "capacity building of leaders" should be interpreted as turning each and every professional in education a leader. A leader of his/hers own personal and professional development first, for which openness is must needed. Secondly, as "trust among stakeholders" is a key factor, communication, knowledge, understanding and dialogue would be the way to build trust. Upon trust collaboration can be implemented, working together for achieving agreed goals. But working together also demands that the action of everyone is grounded in common, shared values, which is not at all easy to get in such a diverse, contradictory, and individualistic world. However, there is no education without hope, which we indeed must preserve, which must prevail.

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What results are you proud of regarding inclusion in your country?

Portugal is a country with a young democratic regime. In fact, historians argue that the only truly democratic period began with the 1974 military coup that put an end to the dictatorship lasting for 48 years, the Colonial War lasting for 13 years and a colonial empire that lasted for 500 years. Following the establishment of the democratic regime, the Constitution of 1976 establishes as a fundamental right that "everyone has the right to learn, assuring the state equal opportunities of access to school and success in the school system to all". After these years, there is now an educational system in Portugal whose compulsory schooling ranges from pre-schooling to the 12th grade or 18 years of age.

On the other hand, in the last two decades, from 2002 to 2018, early drop out decreased from 45% to 11.8% getting close to EU average 10.6%, which in 2002 was 17%, revealing how impressive was the effort made in Portugal to assure effective access and attendance to all children and youngsters.

Another impressive indicator is the way Portuguese students have been preforming in PISA, regardless of criticism addressed to those standardized tests. The fact is that starting from a low performance in 2000, Portuguese students reached, in 2015, both in Math and Reading a rate above the average of OCDE countries. Achievement that was due by assuring for years the conditions to learn to everyone.

Another indicator worthy to be mentioned is that, in a period of 10 years, the reduction into half of the retention rates, by meeting the demand of assuring the access to the same curriculum to all.

We count 99% of the students with special needs attending regular schools, remaining just 1% of them enrolled in special schools. Among those enrolled in regular schools we just count 1% following an individualized curriculum and 0.3% attending specialized units in basic education.

All this besides the new decree in force, DL no. 54/2018, already mentioned above, which allows us to come close of making real the ideal of inclusion in education.

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