

Empirical Articles

School Diagnostic: Perceptions of Educational Professionals

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Abstract

Aim: The school is a privileged context to prevent certain problems that may begin during the development of young students. The main objective is to assess the perceptions of educational professionals about the school structure, functioning, and organization, as well as students' behaviors.

Method: We developed an exploratory study using a questionnaire, applied to a sample of 81 educational agents, teachers and non-teachers, aged between 25 and 62 years ($M = 45.8$, $SD = 10.6$).

Results: Despite the positive perception of the participants about the physical school environment, it is necessary to create spaces for leisure and sport, logistic conditions and multidisciplinary teams in order to maximize the overall good functioning of schools. Adding to this, participants described the participation of parents in the school life as negative; they also identified several disruptive behaviours among students and referred to a general lack of active participation in life school.

Conclusion: It is important to create action plans in schools, which should be multimodal and multi-agent in order to have intervention perspectives with connected actions developed by different educational agents.

Keywords: school, assessment, perceptions, educational professionals

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Introduction

The school is effectively a privileged context for the establishment and consolidation of multiple types of learning and interaction, being simultaneously one of the primary institutions of socialisation (Berns, 2013). In general, the process of individual socialisation depends on the contexts in which it occurs, and on the opportunities and support that are offered for the facilitation of individual development (Wentzel & Looney, 2007). The school is a powerful source of influence, and it has been at the centre of debates that question whether it might be an institution that is failing at its purpose (Dayrell, 2007). This may be related to a recognition that schools face challenges regarding, for example, student failure and underachievement, early abandonment of the educational system, growing disinterest in school activities, sometimes unsuitable environments, difficult and inadequate locations within contemporary cities (Tillman, 2006), the unfavourable physical dimensions of establishments with a high number of students, and other situations that tend to favour antisocial behaviours within the school context (Blaya, 2006).

There are difficulties in schools which, according to [Loeber and Farrington \(1998\)](#), contribute to school malfunction. There are also disadvantages of new schools that are designed for a large number of students, within which it is difficult for students to establish connections ([Costa, Mato, & Morales, 1999](#)). Several authors (e.g., [Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008](#)) have pointed out the need to implement preventive measures that are specifically designed to promote protective factors and reduce risk factors within schools.

We must think of schools as places that should be analysed in light of their difficulties, needs, problems, deficits and resources, and within their particular contexts, so that measures tailored to each specific school community's circumstances may be designed, implemented, evaluated, and integrated ([Kupchnik, 2010](#)). It is imperative to study appropriate groups of such measures, taking into consideration factors as the fact that schools are linked to their larger societies and that they reflect societal characteristics and organisation ([Charlot, 2002](#)).

Despite all that has been said, it is important to note that school is a context where there are frequent problems (e.g., lack of discipline, school failure, truancy, and dropouts), including violence. Many of these problems do not have their origin in schools, but often stem from experiences and problems related to dysfunctional family dynamics (e.g., direct or indirect maltreatment, including exposure to interparental violence and economic deprivation) ([Ehrensaft & Cohen, 2012](#)).

It has been consistently emphasised in the literature that schools and families must function in partnership throughout the process of youth education ([Epstein, 2010](#)). Both schools and families can function either as promoters or as inhibitors of the positive development of young people ([Dessen & Polónia, 2007](#)). In establishing these collaborations between schools and families, it is extremely important to identify the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of school populations, rather than try to offer a diverse range of activities without the adequate contextualisation. When actions do not take into account activities that are adequately contextualised, they will tend to further accentuate the gap between schools and disadvantaged families ([Zendas, 2004](#)).

Analyses about schools and families' involvement (e.g., [Carvalho-Silva, Batista, & Alves, 2014](#)) emphasize the implications of these relationships for the social and cognitive development, and academic success of students ([Dessen & Polónia, 2007](#)). Some analyses and programs (e.g., [Dishion et al., 2014](#)) show how important parental involvement is in their children's school life. Other studies (e.g., [Silva, 1997](#)) have shown that parents who support the school careers of their children feel more involved and increase their expectations for their children, thus helping them in turn to hold higher expectations for themselves and to increase their self-confidence, self-esteem, and academically-oriented self-concepts.

Other studies (e.g., [Volling & Elins, 1998](#)) have shown that parental figures have great influence on the construction of affective bonds, self-esteem, and self-concept, and that they provide relationship models that are subsequently translated by youth into other contexts. Certain authors (e.g., [Villas-Boas, 2001](#)) have also highlighted the family's influence on the formation of personal values, which help to determine a child's relationship with learning and school, as well as his/ her motivation in academic contexts. The role of peers is also described as a source of influence ([Molano, Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2013](#)) within the school context. Because of this, some authors (e.g., [Monahan, Oesterle, Rhew, & Hawkins, 2014](#)) claim that there is a need to try to identify the risk and the protective factors associated with the child's family, school, and community's environment that may affect children's intellectual development.

In light of everything that has already been discussed, there is also a need for schools to undertake regular and systematic reviews and diagnostics aimed at identifying indicators of their level of functioning.

This exploratory study aims to collect data about the educational agents' perceptions, in order to assist in diagnosing the school's environments, surroundings, internal and external functioning, and their students' behaviours.

Method

Sample

Eighty-one educational professionals aged between 25 and 62 ($M = 45.8$, $SD = 10.6$) were included in this study. Most participants were male (74.1%), married (60%), and with a high level of education (76.5%). This is related to the fact that a significant percentage of the sample (79%) was composed of teachers, and 15 participants were non-teachers (Table 1). The average working years of these professionals was 2.71 years ($SD = 1.39$) (Table 1).

Table 1

Participants' Sociodemographic Data ($N = 81$)

Sociodemographic data	<i>n</i>	%
Sex ($n = 78$)		
Female	18	22.2
Male	60	74.1
Marital status ($n = 79$)		
Single	9	11.1
Married	60	74.1
Divorced/Separated	9	11.1
Widow(er)	1	1.2
Educational years ($n = 79$)		
1st to 4th year	5	6.2
5th and 6th year	1	1.2
7th to 9th year	4	4.9
10th to 12th year	7	8.6
Higher Education	62	76.5
Functions at the school ($n = 81$)		
Teacher	64	79.0
Non-teacher	15	18.5
Security Professional	1	1.2
Other	1	1.2
Working years ($n = 77$)		
Less than 4 years	21	25.9
Between 5-9 years	13	16.0
Between 10-14 years	22	27.2
15-20 years	9	11.1
More than 21 years	12	14.8

Data were collected from three school groups located in the city of Oporto, Portugal, and the average number of students per school was 730.

Instruments

The questionnaire we used to the data collection was developed specifically for the purpose of evaluating school environment, taking into account the scientific evidence that has been gathered on this subject. This questionnaire was developed and published by Nunes, Caridade, and Sani (2013), and consists in four domains: i) Socio-demographic information (of each responding professional); ii) School environment and surroundings (questions related to the allocation of space within each respondent's school and to the characteristics of the spaces surrounding the school – e.g., the existence of nearby commercial, industrial or other services, which might disrupt school's functioning); iii) School functioning and dynamics (questions related to factors such as the frequency and nature of school extracurricular activities involving students and staff, and the occurrence of initiatives by which the school interacts and promotes involvement with other institutions in the community); and iv) School behaviour (questions related to students' behaviour and distinctive features of the student population, and to the perceptions of the school professionals who deal with these students). Items are presented in various formats.

Procedure

After obtaining all the necessary authorisations, data collection was carried out during the school year of 2012/2013. We relied on the expertise of several Permanent Observatory Violence and Crime (OPVC) researchers, who had been trained to ensure the standardisation of our procedures. As a first step, participants were asked for informed consent; we informed the individuals about the objectives and study method, and we also told them that they could give up from participation at any time. Participants were also informed of the anonymous and confidential nature of the data. After informed consent was given, all relevant documents were collected and placed in a separate envelope kept exclusively for this purpose, so that they could not be paired with the completed questionnaires.

We used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics, version 21.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.), in order to store, organise, and analyse the information we had obtained. Unless specified otherwise all percentages given in text relate to the total sample size of 81 participants.

Results

Characterisation of School Environments and Their Surroundings

Some participants (51.9%) rated the physical environment surrounding their schools as reasonable. Others (23.5%) said that it was good, and 6.2% answered that it was very good. Among the different characteristics of the surrounding physical environment identified by respondents, those related to ease of access and/or availability of transport services were highlighted by 35.8% (e.g., "It is an urban area with easy accessibility and good transport services"). Others (4.9%) said that their schools had been recently modified (e.g., "This is a school recently reconstructed, so it is very good").

When asked about the quality of their schools' physical spaces, a large number of respondents (54.3%) described them as good (e.g., "It has a good library, the classrooms are well equipped, many of them with interactive whiteboards, ... having a good canteen..."). Similarly, 55.6% of respondents considered that the structural conditions of their schools were adequate for the number of students in the school, and 28.4% said that these conditions were reasonable. When questioned about the presence of commercial/industrial establishments near their schools, some individuals who had answered positively (30.9%) noted proximity to bars/restaurants.

Finally, we asked about potential policy measures that could contribute to improve the conditions of respondents' schools (Table 2), and several answers were given. We emphasize the most frequent, as the creation of leisure and sports activities, and the improvement of the school conditions.

Table 2

Measures Identified by Respondents' to Improve Conditions Schools

Suggestions to improve the conditions in school	<i>n</i>	%
Create spaces for leisure and sports activities	25	30.9
Improve the conditions of the school	23	28.4
Increase the number of educational professionals and integrate professionals working in various scientific fields	15	18.5
Increase control of students	6	7.4
Reduce the number of students per school	4	4.9
Reduce the number of students per class	4	4.9
Make school policy changes and update the statutes	3	3.7

Internal and External Functioning of Schools

The dynamics of internal and external school functioning were also explored in this study. Regarding the dynamic of extracurricular activities in schools, the majority of participants rated it positively: 43.2% said it was good, 28.4% answered that it was reasonable, and 19.8% said the extracurricular activities were very good.

Regarding potential extracurricular events which could promote school involvement and energise the school (see Table 3), a large number of respondents (63%) mentioned cultural events, while 44.4% named sporting events. Other participants mentioned the importance of (in)formative events (e.g., seminars and lectures), while the remaining interviewed mentioned the activities listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Extracurricular Activities Suggested by Respondents

Extracurricular events	<i>n</i>	%
Cultural events	51	63.0
Sporting events	36	44.4
(In)formative events	30	37.0
Study visits	21	25.9
(Other) recreational activities	21	25.9

This pattern of responses seemed to reverse itself when participants had to describe parental involvement in the initiatives promoted by their educational institutions. Thus, out of the group of professionals who responded to this question ($n = 79$), a considerable percentage (40.7%) rated the participation of parents as low, while 16% described it as too low. When asked about the reasons for their ratings, 37% of respondents reported that parents demonstrate low participation and interest in the initiatives undertaken by their schools (e.g., "Parents are generally very poorly motivated/committed to participate in such activities"), while 16% said that parents only participate when called upon, and 2.5% said that parents participate only because of their involvement in the school's Parents Association (e.g., "They participate just because they are part of the Parents Association").

With respect to the community involvement of their schools, out of all who responded to this question ($n = 78$), 45.7% considered it to be reasonable, 24.7% said that it was low, and 1.2% said that it was too low.

All professionals provided responses to questions that were posed regarding how rules and disciplinary regulations are handled in their schools. Most (45.7%) of these professionals rated the procedures as reasonable, while 27.2% described them as good.

A considerable proportion of professionals (48.1%) supported the implementation of more punitive and rigorous disciplinary systems (e.g., “More rigorous implementation and verification of disciplinary procedures”), while 27.2% advocated for the greater involvement/participation of parents in the educational lives of their children (e.g., “It is necessary for there to be greater involvement of parents in the school lives of their children”). Various other actions were suggested by these individuals, as presented in [Table 4](#).

Table 4

Participants' Suggestions to Improve Their Schools' Disciplinary Systems

Measures suggested to enhance the disciplinary system	<i>n</i>	%
More punitive and rigorous disciplinary systems	39	48.1
Involvement/participation of parents in the educational lives of their children	22	27.2
Multidisciplinary teams of professionals	10	12.3
Increase the number of personnel working in the schools	6	7.4
Reduce the number of students (per class and per school)	4	4.9
Creation of leisure or recreational time	2	2.5

Finally, when we asked about the existence of a school psychologist, the vast majority (70.4%) of participants answering the question ($n = 81$) responded affirmatively. Questioned about the reasons why they consider the work of a psychologist in school to be useful, respondents mentioned the need to provide psychological support to students and/or school professionals (56.8%), the need to provide educational and professional orientation (33.3%), and the need to treat and deal with social, economic and behavioural problems (24.7%).

Characterisation of Student Behaviour

In the final component of our evaluation process, we attempted to access responding professionals' perceptions of student behaviour within the school context. The vast majority (56.8%) of participants who rated the behaviour of students ($n = 81$), considered it to be reasonable, 25.9% rated it as bad, and 4.9% answered that it was very bad. Only 11.1% of respondents considered the conduct of students to be good. When we asked participants about school absenteeism, 37% answered that it was considerable, 29.6% answered that it was low, and 4.9% answered that it was very low.

Included in the major conduct problems identified by respondents (see [Table 5](#)) were the following: Widespread disrespect for proper conduct (e.g., norms of the school) (67.9%) (e.g., “The lack of respect is evident inside and outside the classroom”), disrespect for authority figures (25.9%), disrespect between students (18.5%), and even the use of violence (17.3%). A considerable percentage of respondents (13.6%) mentioned disrespect for school equipment.

Table 5

Main Conduct Problems Identified by Respondents

Problems of student conduct/behaviour	n	%
Widespread disrespect for proper conduct (disciplinary rules, etc.).	55	67.9
Disrespect for authority figures	21	25.9
Disrespect between students	15	18.5
Use of violence	14	17.3
Disrespect for school equipment	11	13.6

When asked about undisciplined/disrupted behaviours observed in the school context, many participants (85.2%) reported a significant presence of disruptive behaviours or indiscipline situations that disturb school functioning, while others (64.2%) pointed out actions such as destroying/damaging equipment (e.g., "...destroy the materials and equipment") and throwing garbage to the floor (53.1%). Significantly fewer professionals (17.3%) mentioned the use of inappropriate language (e.g., "Using profanity and insults... there is much verbal violence").

Respondents gave several suggestions for combating the problematic behaviours, as can be seen in Table 6. They placed particular emphasis on the need for greater assumption of responsibility on the part of parents (48.1%) (e.g., "Greater monitoring and accountability of parents") (Table 6).

Table 6

Participants' Suggestions of Strategies to Deal With Students' Behaviour Problems

Strategies/Police measures	n	%
Greater assumption of responsibility by parents	39	48.1
Multifaceted intervention and prevention programme developed by the school	23	28.4
More accuracy in educators actions	22	27.2
More authority/importance to the school role	8	9.9
Increase human resources	8	9.9
Reduce students' number	7	8.6

Discussion

On the whole, the participants of this study expressed favourable opinions on the characteristics of the physical environments within and surrounding their schools, highlighting ease of access and/or effective public transportation, as well as the adequacy of the schools' physical spaces, with many saying that their educational institutions had recently been renovated. Since physical space plays a significant role (Clark, 1989) in crime prevention, this is a positive dimension of this study. Despite of the positive reviews, it is still extremely important to pay attention to potential improvements in these areas, so that schools' conditions might be maintained and enhanced; this was advocated by most of the individuals that were queried.

Among the various measures suggested by them, we highlight the improvement of certain physical conditions, like recreational and sporting areas, an increase in the number of educational professionals, and the creation of multidisciplinary teams that can make a positive contribution to the functioning of the institution. In truth, the school

is partly responsible for the socialization process, and that this process is influenced by the characteristics of the contexts in which it takes place (Wentzel & Looney, 2007).

Another positive dimension of our data was related to inner and outer school functioning. In fact, participants rated positively those extracurricular initiatives that were implemented by school, as well as community exchange policies. These interactional dynamics contribute to the effective functioning of any educational institution and help prevent antisocial behaviours (Tillman, 2006).

Given the relevance and impact of these initiatives, it is vitally important to maintain them, and also to adapt them to the needs of the school population. Thus, these professionals' suggestions should be welcomed, since they arise from firsthand knowledge of the realities of these schools. Participants offered multiple suggestions, including the organisation of cultural and sportive events. They also supported the need to focus on establishing curricular and/or professional internship-related protocols, greater interaction with health institutions, and improved teacher training.

In contrast, the professionals answered negatively regarding the involvement of parents in the initiatives promoted by schools. They justified their responses based on the fact that students' parents only came to school when they were called upon, or due to activities of the Parents Association. Such results are disturbing, considering the amount of evidence supporting the idea that interaction between parents and schools positively encourages the learning process (Rocha, 2006). This apparent "resignation" or "failure" of parents with respect to school activities has been widely studied (Gonçalves, 2010). The social and economic conditions of families (or lack of those conditions) may also help to explain the lower involvement of parents in school life. So these data require a proper contextualisation. It is well known that family plays a decisive role in the socialization process. However, we cannot neglect the potential influence of schools on the choices that young people make in the course of their school careers (Gonçalves, 2010).

As has been stated by some authors (e.g., Almeida, 2005), the family is a powerful and persistent agent that contributes to the construction of the school environment. The establishment of a partnership between home and school (e.g., Epstein, 2010) is something to be striven for, and any such partnership should also take into account the surrounding community. However, teachers, in their capacity as classroom managers (Zendas, 2004), still play a main role in promoting a "participatory education", by doing such things as: i) soliciting and encouraging parents to participate in school activities, both to increase awareness of families regarding their children's school lives and to benefit from their support; and ii) increasing parents' knowledge of the school, its mission, its objectives, and the work that is done by various educational agents (Epstein, 2010).

Generally, individuals considered the disciplinary systems to be appropriate. However, they identified several measures that could help to create better systems, including making the systems more severe and punitive, increasing the involvement of parents, or even creating multidisciplinary teams that could help increase the effectiveness of current systems. Note that integrated approaches to disciplinary systems have been identified as more effective in solving problems in schools (Kupchnik, 2010).

The presence of a school psychologist was described as essential by the majority of respondents. However, psychological support should always be concerned with the interactions that take place in schools (Abreu, 1996). Thus, it is important that the psychologist looks to different microsystems in which a child is embedded (Pinto & Leal, 1991).

Regarding participants' perceptions about the conduct of students, 56.8% considered it reasonable. But a considerable percentage also spoke negatively about student behaviours (about 30% of respondents). These data are particularly important considering that school is a place where negative conduct can be reinforced, and is also a context in which we can find risk factors for the development of other types of antisocial behaviour. Effectively, the school is a privileged place for engaging in the types of bonds that are normative in society, or for engaging in deviant cultures (Hirschi, 1971).

School absenteeism was described by participants as being relatively prevalent in the educational institutions to which they belong. So, it is urgent to evaluate the factors involved in this phenomenon.

Other behavioural problems identified were the *lack of respect*. In fact, this issue is frequently reported in the literature (Estrela, 1994; Garcia, 2006). Participants in this exploratory study also noted undisciplined behaviour in schools. Indiscipline can contribute to a denigration of the image and pride of educational institutions, and these behaviours should be prevented so as to avoid consequent negative effects on the functioning of schools (Garcia, 2006).

Given the results we obtained, we reaffirm the importance of conducting school evaluations. Our results underscore the significant role that school plays in the socialisation process, and support the idea that the contemporary school faces many challenges and problems.

Nevertheless, our study faced some limitations, which we would like to note. First, this is a pilot study, and therefore it is not possible to generalise its results and conclusions. Second, we expected at the beginning of this study to obtain a larger sample. Third, the receptivity and openness of the educational providers (more precisely, teachers) were poor, and a great number of them did not return completed questionnaires. This leads us to wonder about their lack of commitment to completing this task. Moreover, it is an indicator of their lack of knowledge on the characteristics, dynamics, and functioning of their schools and it may be a cause for concern. Finally, we conducted only a descriptive analysis, which limited us in some ways. So, in later studies, we will conduct other analyses, which will allow us to obtain a more holistic view of how schools function.

Taking into account some of the data obtained in this study, it seems to be crucial to determine some directions for future research in this area. Thus, given participants' negative evaluations of parental involvement, and the evidence for the importance of school and family interactions, it would be important to further explore this issue in future studies.. In fact, it would be important to understand how family characteristics and strategies can help to improve school performance and enhance the social development of students. It would improve our understanding of critical dimensions of change processes within the field of education (Nunes, 2000).

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Competing Interests

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