Article

Parenting and Parental Involvement in Secondary School: Focus Groups with Adolescents' Parents[1]

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Abstract: Parental role in the adolescents' development is widely described as challenging, particularly regarding their involvement in school education. With the aim of examining parents' perceptions about parenting role, parental involvement and family-school partnership in the secondary school, two focus groups were conducted with parents in two public schools. Results, overall, indicate that the establishment of rules, monitoring and support were very challenging and important to the adolescents' development. Parental involvement change throughout school and several reasons were pointed out to the changes observed in secondary school: the demands of the level of education, the lack of time, adolescents' autonomy, , and teachers' communication style. Regarding family-school relations, the parents shared different experiences about the way the partnership was promoted and developed.

Keywords: parenting, involvement, parent school relationship, focus group, adolescents

Parentalidade e Envolvimento Parental no Ensino Secundário: Grupos Focais com Pais de Adolescentes

Resumo: O papel dos pais no desenvolvimento dos adolescentes é amplamente descrito como sendo desafiante, em particular quanto ao seu envolvimento na educação escolar. Com o objetivo de analisar as perceções de pais de adolescentes sobre o papel parental, o envolvimento parental e a parceria família-escola no ensino secundário foram conduzidos dois grupos focais em duas escolas públicas. Os resultados, globalmente, indicam que o estabelecimento de regras, a monitorização e o apoio são funções parentais desafiantes e importantes no desenvolvimento dos adolescentes. O envolvimento parental altera-se durante a escolaridade e várias razões foram apontadas para as mudanças no ensino secundário: as exigências deste nível de escolaridade, a falta de tempo, a autonomização dos adolescentes e o estilo de comunicação dos professores. Quanto às relações família-escola, os pais partilharam experiências diferenciadas sobre a promoção e desenvolvimento desta parceria.

Palavras-chave: parentalidade, envolvimento, relações pais-escola, grupos focais, adolescentes

Responsabilidad Parental e Envolvimiento Parental en la Educación Secundaria: Grupos Focales con Padres de Adolescentes

Resumen: El papel de los padres en el desarrollo de los adolescentes es ampliamente descrito como desafiante, especialmente su participación en la educación escolar. Con objeto de analizar la percepción de los padres sobre la responsabilidad parental, el envolvimiento de los padres y la colaboración familia-escuela en la educación secundaria, se realizaron dos grupos focales en dos escuelas publicas. Los resultados globalmente indican que el establecimiento de normas, la supervisión y el apoyo son funciones parentales desafiantes e importantes en el desarrollo de los adolescentes. El involucramiento parental se altera durante la escolarización y varias razones fueron apuntadas para los cambios en la educación secundaria: las exigencias de este nivel de educación, la falta de tiempo, la autonomía de los adolescentes y el estilo de comunicación de los profesores. Respecto a las relaciones familia-escuela, los padres compartieron diferentes experiencias en la promoción y desarrollo de esta alianza.

Palabras clave: parentalidade, envolvimento, relaciones padre-escuela, grupos focales, adolescentes

Parenting has been one of the main focuses of empirical research in developmental and educational fields and much theorising has been advanced about parents' personal and social factors that better foster children's growth and development. Particularly in adolescence there are several developmental and contextual transformations as well as chal-

lenges that affect not only adolescents but also their parents. The transition to secondary school is a period with several developmental tasks, involving academic challenges, decision-making processes, regulation of peer socialisation and important vocational decisions (Brkovic, Kerestes, & Levpuscek, 2014; Diogo, 2007; Ginevra, Nota, & Ferrari, 2015), and for an adaptive transition, parents can act as facilitators (Gordon & Cui, 2012; Simpkins et al., 2009) and as protectors (Spera, 2005). In fact, parental behaviours (e.g. warmth, acceptance, support, involvement) as well as parent-child relationships (e.g. openness, closeness, warmth) have been touted as powerful tools to promote a positive socio-emotional, behavioural, and academic development (Garthe, Sullivan, & Kliewer, 2015; Ginevra et al., 2015; Shumow & Lomax, 2002; Surjadi, Lorenz, Wickrama, & Conger, 2011; Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014; Wilder, 2014). Nevertheless, among several parenting practices, parental involvement in school education is one that is most important regarding educational outcomes and future success (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Gordon & Cui, 2012; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011; Wang et al., 2014; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014; Wilder, 2014).

Despite indications that parental involvement is still important during adolescence (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), most of its conceptual models were developed and validated with parents of elementary school children or early adolescents (Fan, Williams, & Wolters, 2012; Jeynes, 2012). Furthermore, many of the studies tended to use parenting and parental involvement as direct and indirect predictors of school achievement, failing to address the developmental complexity of its inherent processes and the synergies among parental involvement, adolescent outcomes and school context (family-school relationship) (Wang et al., 2014). Thus, it is important to better understand how parenting interplay with parental involvement to influence to adolescents development throughout secondary school. Taking this into consideration, we undertook this study to explore parents' perspectives about parenting the adolescents, their involvement in the secondary school education as well as the family-school relationship in the Portuguese context.

The conceptualisation of parenting is essentially achieved through parental styles and practices that seek to promote, monitor, support, protect and encourage their children's development and adaptation (Spera, 2005). But how are these parenting functions played out during adolescence? One main parental task is to *monitor* the external influences and overcome the negative impact from surrounding environments in which the adolescent takes part, which is linked to the *support* for dealing with new challenges and succeeding in solving and acquiring new competences (Holmbeck, Paikoff, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Shumow & Lomax, 2002; Spera, 2005). Parents are also asked to *participate* actively in the school context and other community agencies for youth in order to promote adolescents' growth, academic success and adaptation (Shumow & Lomax, 2002). Research demonstrates that these parenting practices may be affected by factors such as family atmosphere – levels of stress, support and family resources (Bartle-Haring, Younkin, & Day, 2012; Lam & Ducreux, 2013) –, social-cognitive appraisals – parental beliefs about development (Parke &

Buriel, 2006; Wang, Dishion, Stormshak, & Willett, 2011) and characteristics of the adolescents – self-esteem, independence, self-concept (Simpkins et al., 2009).

The parent-adolescent relationship is another important dimension considered on parenting research. Adolescence has been described in the literature as a period of conflict, reorganisation and realignment of family bonds and the content and quality of relationships, more than the isolated actions of either parent or adolescent, also determine the nature and extent of parental influences on adolescent's development (Bartle-Haring et al., 2012; Brkovic et al., 2014; Lam & Ducreux, 2013; Surjadi et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2014). The acquisition of values and autonomy are some of the specific dimensions reported in the literature (Barni, Ranieri, Scabini, & Rosnati, 2011; Collins & Laursen, 2004; Holmbeck et al., 1995; Parke & Buriel, 2006). Some adolescents develop these acquisitions more easily than others, and some parents are best succeeded at fostering adolescents' autonomy than others. A parent-adolescent relationship based on the balance between emotional closeness and providing structure and supporting autonomy may better fit adolescents' needs and foster independency (Lansford, Laird, Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 2014; Wang et al., 2014). The effects of parent-adolescent relations are diversified and extended to other relational spheres such as the adolescents' relations with peers, teachers, and other adults as well as romantic relationships (Brkovic et al., 2014; Brown & Bakken, 2011; Holmbeck et al., 1995).

School is a microsystem, out of the familial sphere, where the parenting behaviours, specifically parental involvement, might have a positive effect on students' learning, academic trajectory and future expectations. Through meta-analysis, Jeynes (2011, 2012) has discriminated and reflected about different types of parental involvement that are related and unrelated to children's education and academic achievement. In general, parents tend to become less involved across schooling and the level of involvement in different activities varies as well (LaRocque et al., 2011; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Much research has attempted to define parental involvement, but there is not a clear operational definition of the parents' practices, considering a range of variables such as school-to-home communication, parental values and involvement in school functions, as well as control of homework and reactions towards grades. Considering a broad definition of parental involvement that includes a wide variety of parental behaviours and practices, several researchers have adopted a multidimensional approach, identifying and studying specific components of this construct (Wang et al., 2014; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014; Wilder, 2014). Based on a contextual perspective, Epstein (1995) developed one of the most recognised theoretical frameworks of parental involvement systematising six different levels of involvement. This typology is frequently used to create programmes for enhancing the partnerships between schools, parents and the broader community: (1) parenting, (2) communication, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision-making, and (6) collaborating with community. The definition and differentiation of parents' involvement in this study was supported by Epstein's classification.

In the last decades, Portugal has experienced several social, demographic and technological changes with a visible impact on society, families and school structures. In particular, in the education system, the increase of the level of compulsory education for school added greater responsibilities to students' education and development. This phenomenon of *massification* of education propelled the intensification of heterogeneity of students attending school (mainly in public schools), which consequently raised the need for synchronised cooperation between school and families, fostering interdependence among these systems (Marques, 1998). Nonetheless, the interconnections between family and school still tend to present some flaws not yet overcome by the educative agents.

A series of legal norms were promulgated, creating awareness of the need to consider parents as essential agents in the educative system. Therefore, all the improvements in the legal framework aimed to promote and to regulate family engagement and involvement in the school educational project, and mainly consist of: (1) helping with extracurricular activities (celebrations, school trips, etc.); (2) participation in the classroom boards (possibility to take part in the curricula programme for the classroom); (3) participation in the Association of Parents; and (4) participation in the pedagogical board (possibility to take part in the decisions regarding the school educational programme) (Dias, 2005). To successfully achieve communication between teachers and parents, the education level of parents and the interactions between parents and adolescent are fundamental (Dias, 2005; Marques, 1998; Silva, 2003). The scarce empirical evidence on this matter has highlighted the lack of participation of parents in school educational programmes and identified some explanations for the absence of the family-school partnership (Williams & Sanchez, 2012). First, the initiatives specified in the law and consequently the strategies put into practice by schools are more appropriate to engage parents of middle social class, and therefore inadequate to include the wide range of families that comprise schools (Dias, 2005; Marques, 1998; Mendel, 2007; Silva, 2003). Second, as Silva (2003) concluded in his studies, teachers and parents do not seem to be used to cooperating, which might be related to both agents' lack of preparation (Dias, 2005; Diogo, 2007; Mendel, 2007; Silva, 2003). And at last, parents' expectations/intentions of involvement are not always manifested in behaviours of engagement in their adolescents' school education (Diogo, 2007). Overall, these reasons are compatible with the model posited by Hornby and Lafaele (2011), which organised, into five blocks, the barriers to the parents, family and school partnership: (1) broader societal factors that may affect both school and family functioning (e.g. economic crisis), (2) parent-teacher factors (e.g. communication style, cooperation dynamics), (3) individual parent (e.g., educational level, parents perceptions about parental involvement and academic invitations), (4) family factors (e.g. family structure; socioeconomic status), as well as (5) child factors (e.g. age, gender, grade and academic achievement). Therefore, taking the above limitations into account, most of the programmes to enhance parental involvement have focused on the communication between school and family, interactive involvement and the partnership (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; LaRocque et al., 2011; Marques, 1998).

Thus, grounded on these theoretical assumptions and empirical findings, this study focused on parents' perceptions of parenting roles during their children's adolescence, on the one hand and parental involvement in school and how they describe the family-school partnership, on the other hand.

Method

Participants

Two public schools from Porto were selected and contacted personally and formally (in written form) to allow parents' participation. Selection criteria included only parents who participated in the Association of Parents and who had adolescents attending 10th, 11th and 12th grades.

Therefore, the Presidents of the Association of Parents were contacted who, in turn, called other parents and invited them to participate (a maximum of 10). The two focus groups included seven (four mothers and three fathers) and nine parents (four mothers and five fathers), whose children were enrolled in different secondary school levels. Besides the President, both groups included the members of the pedagogical board. Except two mothers, all parents were employed.

Procedure

Data collection. Two researchers (a moderator and a note taker) conducted these two sessions, using a previously prepared guide with several issues to be addressed – parenting, parental involvement and family-school relationship. These two unique sessions took place in a meeting room of both schools. At the beginning of each session, the moderator explained the study and its goals as well as the rules: no order or obligation to speak was imposed, so parents were invited to participate whenever they felt comfortable or wanted to express their point of view; to be perceptible to everyone and to ease further analysis, parents were asked to participate one at a time; no names were spoken or stated during the taping in order to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. After everyone agreed with the rules and procedures, the initial key issue was launched (e.g.: "what does it mean to be a parent of an adolescent today?"). Parents expressed their experiences/perceptions dynamically and interspersed. Both sessions were tape-recorded and lasted 90 minutes on average.

Data analysis. After transcribing the two tape-recording and preparing the documents to be coded, the process of coding was initiated in *NVivo 8* software. Content analysis means 'deconstructing' the speech and then 'building' it in parts, highlighting the underlying meaning of its total *corpus*. Our main concern was to preserve the integrity and meaning of the parents' discourses and for that purpose we adopted an inductive method of reading and rereading. Following this method, we sought to identify, analyse and infer the salient perceptions of the *corpus*, and for that the unit of semantic

or reference was guided by the criteria of meaning (theme) and not by grammatical formal criteria (e.g. number of words, sentences). During this process, we followed the guidelines of Miles and Huberman (1994) for qualitative coding (which involves data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/check), of Krueger and Casey (2009) for the analytic framework to code the data (identification of patterns and relationships between ideas and concepts), as well as of Richards (2005) for the use and profitability of *Nvivo8* software. We created a common tree node in *Nvivo8*, with the following categories: (a) parental functions; (b) parental involvement; and (c) family-school partnership. Each of these categories included sub-categories based on the literature. Thus, parental functions category was organised according to the type of development in which parenting behaviours exerted influence: (1) cognitive development; (2) emotional development; (3) social development; (4) moral development; and (5) academic development. The parental involvement category was sub-divided according to the aforementioned Epstein's types of involvement: (1) parenting; (2) communication; (3) volunteering; (4) learning at home; (5) decision-making; and (6) collaborating with community. And the last category – family-school partnership – comprised three sub-categories: (1) positive aspects; (2) negative aspects; and (3) suggestions for promoting the family-school partnership.

In addition to the definition of the questioning guide and the category tree, during the process we had some other methodological precautions in order to guarantee the reliability of the coding and analysis processes. A first coding was conducted in both focus groups data and to achieve consistency in the analysis, a second coding was performed one month later and compared to the first version. Another procedure consisted of systematically comparing the transcripts with the recordings (before the coding process the note taker was requested to verify the reliability of transcript sessions) as well as to verify the content analysis and conclusions drawn from the transcripts.

Ethical Considerations

This particular kind of research does not require the approval of an ethics committee other than the schools and the adult participants consent. As previously described, the school principals signed an informed consent form to authorize the data collection with parents. Afterwards, the researcher began the focus groups sessions by explaining to parents the purpose of study and requesting their participation and permission to record (audio and video) the session, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

Results

The findings presented below were achieved by the analyses of the questions asked during the focus groups: (1) What does it mean to be a parent of an adolescent today?; (2) How do parents get involved in secondary school?; (3) To what extent is important to be involved in this level of education?; (4) How parents describe family-school relationship?

Parental Functions

According to parents' perspective, parenting "is the hardest work of our lives, it is a lifetime job" and considered that "being a parent of an adolescent is even more difficult" (father 2, school 1), since it has several implications for the adolescent's cognitive, emotional, academic, social and moral growth and development. Therefore, parents' perceptions mainly focused on the changes and challenges they have to manage daily in the interaction with their children.

The establishment of rules and enforcement was one of the most discussed aspects of adolescent education and considered one of the major concerns in daily parental practices. The "rush of life" limited parents' interaction with their offspring and education by "giving an example" as the most common practice regarding this dimension. They also felt that 'sometimes what is important is not what we say but what they see as examples' (mother 2, school 2), which means it is the parents' job to "give an example", and that "to change a child's behaviour, you need to take the first step" (mother 1, school 2). Among the several individual challenges, parents considered that adolescents tend to adopt a confrontational attitude towards parents, questioning and debating the set of rules established. Thus, it demands parents to "balance" when setting the rules and to be consciousness of the moments they may be more flexible, without "contradicting" themselves or being misunderstood.

> The great difficulty is the balance, which is essential. In the case of adolescents, it is a matter of rebellion we are elected as the enemy to test the strength, both physical and psychological. And being parents of one adolescent is to make him/her understand that there are rules to be fulfilled and others that can be flexible. (father 1, school 1)

Regarding the balance in the decision-making over the rules, autonomy was another developmental task parents mentioned. Both groups of parents agreed on the way autonomy was established today. To become autonomous and independent, adolescents have to develop a set of cognitive, emotional and moral tools that in parents' view start to be enhanced at home. Parents recognised that they provided adolescents with all those tools and conditions "to go fishing", although fear makes them more supportive and protective than they think they should.

> But we always put off the "go fishing by yourself". We say how to fish, we say that water is tricky, because you cannot see the bottom, we say the stream is very strong, we tell them to study the stream and murky water, that the fishing rods are not always as flexible as needed. When it comes to the moment to say "Now go", we say "Ok, we both go...", I mean, we always have fear. (father 2, school 1)

However, when it comes to school, this supportive and protective attitude seems to be quite different. Parents con-

sidered their role as to "support as much as possible in their learning and at home... get to know a little bit about how they are going, track their academic performance, so we can also follow and help them to overcome possible problems" (father 1, school 2). Nevertheless, in practice that monitoring and support was not easily accomplished. Overall, it was admitted that it was difficult to support them at this level of schooling, because "I have to study to help me to recall the subjects... My difficulty is not with that one, my difficulty is to deal with them because they do not accept my help" (mother 2, school 2). So, parents see adolescents as more autonomous, on the one hand, and more resistant to get any parental help, on the other hand. The lack of time, lack of academic knowledge and lack of interest were some of the reasons highlighted to explain why parental school support decreases at this level of schooling.

The lack of time was also one of the reasons cited when parents mentioned monitoring external influences and adolescents' social networks. They admitted that many parents "do not have time and tend to get things easier in children's upbringing" (mother 1, school 1) and their functions also included "knowing and finding out other things about them, their environment, and friends" (mother 1, school 1). And "there is another part that involves emotions, thoughts and creativity in other environments different from school" (mother 1, school 1) that must be taken into account and at this point seemed to be a little bit neglected by parents.

Parental Involvement in School

Parents' involvement in school life was frequently related to academic success, especially in the first levels of schooling, and parents recognised that "the greater the presence and involvement of parents in school the greater the percentage of success" (father 2, school 1). However, parents also assumed that there was a great decrease of involvement in secondary school and explored some of the reasons for this; parental involvement was quite different in both school contexts.

Based on Epstein's types of involvement, these experiences may be included mainly in *parenting*, *communicating*, *learning at home* and *decision-making* types. No activity that could be connected to *volunteering* and *collaborating with community* were described. Parenting depended also on the help that the school could provide to the families, aiming to increase parents' understanding about their children's development, academic achievement and vocational choices. The meetings with the classroom director and a few extra-curricular activities (theatre shows, celebrations and conferences) were the leading initiatives mentioned by both groups of parents. Overall, parents from school 1 admitted there was a high and atypical attendance of parents at these regular meetings; the opposite was said to occur in school 2, in which the participation was considered low. Specifically regarding the extra-curricular activities in the second school, parents recognised that "school helps a lot in all the activities that the Association of Parents promotes" (mother 3, school 2), i.e., the school is open and proactive when the Association of Parents has "ideas and tries to put them into practice" (mother 2, school 2), in contrast with most parents who are not very participative. The inexpressive parental participation in the extra-curricular activities was also claimed by parents of school 1, who considered it difficult to revert the trend: "even the Association of Parents wants to call the parents and make conferences and it is difficult to motivate parents to come to school" (father 1, school 1).

Beyond the lack of time, the absence of parents was also considered to be associated with teachers' communication style. The role played by teachers to engage parents and stimulate them to come to school more often was a crucial aspect. From the parents' point of view the majority of teachers tended not to have engaging attitudes to motivate parents to be more involved in their children's school life. One of the specific attitudes they mentioned was the fact that teachers generally "call parents to school because of the negative part" (father 1, school 1), especially for justifying adolescents' negative academic and social behaviours. Moreover, they also thought "teachers should be mediators, (…) should assure that parents would not come to school only to receive bad news, which is normal, but also to listen to good feedback" (father 2, school 1). Also, the group of parents from school 1 found that most of the time teachers were not very available and supportive when parents tried to be more proactive regarding school decisions. The other group of parents, on the other hand, shared the opposite experience, saying that school was "open to talking with parents, when needed" and very "interested in creating, in promoting our growth and to get us involved" (mother 2, school 2).

Another type of involvement was learning at home, and for most parents getting involved was easier "during their children's middle schooling - studying with them, or providing guidance in study, and answering some questions" (father 3, school 1). When adolescents started attending secondary school, the academic system changed and parents tended to feel unable to give them the appropriate help; "there are certain subjects that go beyond our knowledge" (father 2, school 2). As previously noted, besides the lack of academic knowledge, parents also did not have much time, and these were the major reasons evoked to explain why they tended to get less involved in secondary school and monitor the adolescents less in their academic tasks. In both groups of parents, it was consensual that there was a misconception among most parents about how they could and should be more proactive in their children's academic life. Parental support cannot be felt "as an obligation", but as being available to help solve the problems. According to parents, children just need to "feel supported so that things start to flow differently" (mother 2, school 1) and the Association of Parents "tries to show, in many ways, that monitoring at school usually do not need much knowledge" (father 1, school 1). According to this father, parents did not need to know the specific contents of the scholastic programmes in order to monitor their adolescents' study, sometimes it could be enough to ask "Hey, tell me what you have been studying" (father 3, school 1).

Family-School Partnership

This topic aimed to disclose parents' point of views about the family-school communication and how the partnership between them was established in order to contribute to an efficacious educational system. Thus, this topic corresponded with Epstein's *decision-making* typology.

The groups of parents from schools 1 and 2 presented two quite different scenarios of parental involvement, which consequently led us to different perceptions on how parents and school agents (director and teachers) communicate and interact with each other. It is important to remember that some of the interviewed parents were members of the Association of Parents and some of them at the same time were integrated in the school assemblies.

Thus, while school 2 was described as having the doors opened to "whenever a parent wants to come to school" (father 1, school 2), school 1 was described as having the doors "flanked to parents, and the parents had to open the doors of the school 90 % of the time" (father 2, school 1), when they attempted to be an active part of the definition of goals, and planning the strategies of action. In this last school, parents added that sometimes they felt "that associations of parents just have an important role to raise money, to give some medals and cups, to arrange good budgets and to assure security in some parties" (father 1, school 1). Despite this, they also recognised there was a positive change in teachers' attitudes and "there are more teachers who think that effectively we have a role to play and it can be positive for the implementation of some projects in the school" (father 1, school 1).

Parents were asked to reflect about possible initiatives in order to enhance the partnership family-school. Being aware that "there are barriers that still need to be changed, and are unfinished" (father 2, school 1), parents said that one possible way for promoting the partnership could be to encourage more informal events, in addition to the commonly held events already taking place in the different school contexts (theatres, sport activities with parents, celebrating special days such as mother's/father's day, the prom, etc.).

> ... It is in a relaxed atmosphere that facilitates the exchange between teachers, students, parents, which will be a closer, like it or not ... It is in a relaxed atmosphere, because the formal educational environment is no longer efficacious. (...) Because, in these events, the teacher, is closer to reality than the students' parents, so he/she also has interest (...) and he/she knows he/she will take advantage if he/she has a better understanding of the family and family functioning. Sometimes we have a very limited analysis of the family, and when we know the family, we change our concept and we change the perception we have of that individual. (mother 2, school 1)

Discussion

The findings of this study provided an exploratory overview of how parents perceive their parenting roles and parental involvement as well as the family-school partnership occurring in the secondary school.

Considering the parenting functions, establishing rules to guide the adolescent's behaviour in their contexts of action (Holmbeck et al., 1995; Parke & Buriel, 2006) was described as one of the most difficult tasks by both groups of parents. This particular issue may be of huge importance during adolescence, given the fact that adolescents have less direct parental supervision (Bartle-Haring et al., 2012; Parke & Buriel, 2006). Empirical findings have shown that parents engaging in moderate control over the adolescents' behaviours are likely to have a positive impact on their social adjustment (Simpkins et al., 2009). Lam and Ducreux (2013), in turn, found no significant association among parental help, monitoring and pressure and academic achievements. However, the authors denoted that a good communication pattern between parents--children was related to higher academic outcomes.

Aware of the implications, parents shared their particular concerns about balancing the establishment of rules and the strictness of enforcing them, since it entails negotiation, debate and sometimes the modification of pre-defined aspects. For instance, Barni et al. (2011) concluded that adolescents were willing to accept the values that promote their autonomy and personal development as well as those about concern and respect for the well-being of others. About autonomy, in general, parents recognised adopting a protective stance with their children was necessary to provide the tools for promoting their independence, but also tended to stand too close when the adolescents tried use those tools to accomplish it. Parental attitudes during the autonomy process were a challenge, just as other researchers (Barni et al., 2011) mentioned, in the exercise of parenting roles, parents have to consider the aspects of dependency, the need for security and the establishment of rules in the parent-adolescent relationship, but not disregard the adolescent's increasing need for autonomy.

Recognising the lack of time to spend with their children, parents also expressed concerns about controlling the adolescents' external influences and being a model in their growth and development. Concerning this matter, Shumow and Lomax (2002) also highlighted that parents of older adolescents believed they had less control over peer influences and community resources than parents of younger adolescents. In fact, as adolescence evolves the relationship with peers changes and the influence of other contexts become more pervasive, implicating a change in the role played by parents as well (Brown & Bakken, 2011; Collins & Laursen, 2004; Wang et al., 2011). However, as Holmbeck et al. (1995) affirmed, besides parents' concerns about the loss of control, they still are the adolescents' primary source of influences regarding values, goals to accomplish and decision-making, which was in line with Barni et al. (2011) empirical assumptions about the adolescent's acceptance of parents' values.

Several studies have shown that parental involvement in children's academic education tends to decrease across

schooling (Jeynes, 2011). According to parents' perspectives, we found differences in parents' attendance in school meetings, on the one hand, and in the perceived family-school relationship, on the other hand. The interpretation of these results must be made carefully, although it seems likely to follow the trend observed in other schooling levels, i.e., parents tend to get less involved in secondary education, and some of the explanations proffered by parents led us to the set of barriers described previously (Dias, 2005; Mendel, 2007; Silva, 2003). Thus, as several researchers mentioned (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; LaRocque et al., 2011; Williams & Sanchez, 2012), parents also highlighted the level of education, teachers' style of communication and students' characteristics (autonomy, academic performance) as the main reasons to explain the disconnection between parents and school. The lack of time was also added to the reasons highlighted to explain the low participation in school education.

In their study, Gordon and Cui (2012) found that parents who were more involved seemed consequently to have a better relationship with their children's teachers, to be more likely to intercede in important school matters and to provide guidance and tutoring to their children's academic performance. However, these conclusions did not entirely fit with what the parents of both groups expressed regarding their participation in school. In fact, parents from school 1, with a higher level of participation, perceived their relationship with teachers as not always being proactive and easy as they thought it should be; however they also admitted that there has been a positive change in school agents (director, teachers), who were more open to parents' participation. On the other hand, parents from school 2, with less parental involvement, considered teachers' attitude as very open and concerned enough to call parents to come to school more often and at the same time facilitated all parents' initiatives. Probably, these attitudes are a sign of the modifications in the educational law framework over the last decades that consequently stimulated the school agents' perspective (director, teachers) to recognise the importance of parental involvement in the school project.

Concerning student's guidance and tutoring, corresponding to Epstein's home-based involvement, parents considered it very difficult to manage at this level of schooling. Among the several reasons, parents assumed that the demands of this particular level of schooling made it difficult to provide the help or the support to their children. Arriving at the same conclusion, several researchers (Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; LaRocque et al., 2011; Marques, 1998; Silva, 2003; Williams & Sanchez, 2012) stressed the need to design educational programmes for parents in order to promote strategies to overcome their difficulties. But would this be enough to improve parental involvement? According to the experts (Epstein & Sanders, 2002) during middle school, there are several aspects of involvement that no longer have the same effectiveness on the adolescents' academic achievement, and others aspects that are not accounted for but can actually have an influence. Thus, it is imperative to get to know the extent to which parental involvement influences school achievement and which types of involvement are the most appropriate for secondary school (LaRocque et al.,

2011). This also implies getting to know parental motivations more deeply, their expectations regarding their children's performance or their career aspirations, etc.

Overall, parents' overview about their involvement and the family-school relationship corroborated the fragilities in this partnership that researchers have highlighted (Diogo, 2007; Silva, 2003) in previous studies conducted in primary and elementary schools. In fact, there was a disconnect between family and school contexts, represented through socio-cultural differences, parents and students' characteristics and teachers' attitudes, that seems to be transversal to all levels of schooling.

Although our results coincided with other empirical evidence, there were some methodological aspects that may be seen as limitations, which consequently shall be addressed in future directions for research. Firstly, due to research interests the sample was not randomly selected. Secondly, given the qualitative nature, we cannot generalise our findings to other school contexts. Another point to consider is that we only gathered the perspectives of parents. It would be useful to obtain other educative agents' perspectives, such as teachers and students, and include other types of data collection (e.g. individual interviews) in order to have a deeper understanding of these topics. Also, it would be important to conduct more than two focus groups and a wider number of schools participating which would have revealed a deeper understanding of the Portuguese school system.

Despite these limitations, our findings provided insights about parents' main concerns and challenges in the exercise of their parental role and the most common forms of involvement in secondary school as well as the dynamics of the family-school partnership. Indeed, it was recognized the importance of parents' participation in school education, but it also lifted the veil to show the need for conceptualising other forms of involvement in the equation of family school-relationship. In our approach (Epstein, 1995), parental involvement was considered to have home- and school-based strategies that were validated in elementary and middle school. Wang et al. (2014), for example, considering the adolescents' changing developmental needs, investigated another type of involvement – *academic socialization* – and found it corresponded more effectively to adolescents' educational needs. Thus, future investigation should further examine if these and other new conceptions of involvement reflect the active participation of parents in the education of their children.

As mentioned, according to the different approaches there are a set of intervention programmes and strategies (Dias, 2005; Marques, 1998) implemented mainly in elementary schools that have achieved positive results. Currently, the family-school partnership and its inherent fragilities are, at some point, in line with those described two decades ago; most of these programmes have not been adjusted to the current reality of education and the community's needs, especially in secondary education. From these exploratory results we can "take some notes" that could be important for future research and design of intervention programmes that provide parents with the necessary resources and techniques to accomplish school-related parenting and involvement.

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