Is there a School discipline crisis?
What teachers and students think about?[1]

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Abstract

The present article, concerning teacher and student conceptions of school discipline, aims at contributing to the understanding of this phenomenon in the Portuguese schools, particularly in those of the archipelago of the Azores[2]. Nowadays there is a tendency to believe that *the whole school is undisciplined*, that the school is, more and more, a place where students learn disruptive behaviors, instead of being a place which generates new and interesting contributions for students' life project. This conception comprises, at least, two types of dangers: it can (1) correspond to a self-fulfilled prophecy and (2) represent an injustice to teachers and students, if it is reported to singular cases that are naturally not the rule. Data gathered in the Azores, in line with findings from other research, indicates that indiscipline appears to be a circumscribed phenomenon. Thus, the notion of generalized disorder in schools appears to be abusive.

PHENOMENON

School discipline has gathered a great amount of attention. It has been the subject of a large number of national and international scientific publications; it has been at the center of speeches and conversations of teachers, students, families and other social agents less involved in the educational system, and it has even constituted a source of great interest for the media.

Authors researching in the field tend to consider indiscipline as a bigger problem for teachers than for students, since it seems to affect more the former than the latter (e.g. Carita & Fernandes, 1977; Veiga, 1999). To support this position they claim that indiscipline is an important cause of teacher burnout cases as well as of teachers leaving the profession (Esteve, 1991; Jesus, 1996). Indeed, research has regularly referenced the excessive tension in teaching, caused by teachers' feeling of not controlling the classroom, as one of the most influential agents in teachers' sense of professional failure (Dortu, 1993; Fuller, 1969; Veiga, 1999; Veenman, 1984).

In Portugal, studies about this subject have followed three major approaches: sociological, psychological and pedagogical. The first set of studies points towards a

[2] The Azores are a Portuguese archipelago comprising nine volcanic islands, in the Atlantic Ocean, between the western European coast and the American continent.

dependency between (in)discipline and socio-political, socio-economic and socio-demographic variables. In this framework, the pedagogical relation sits in a relation of power between the social system and the educational system and/or between teachers and students. Indiscipline results from forms of resistance and confrontation between different cultural codes and negotiation positions (e.g. Afonso, 1991; Domingues, 1995). The second approach focuses on individual aspects, such as self-concept or locus of control (Caldeira, 2000; Veiga, 1995). Although recent studies have reported a concern with prevention, this line of research has historically emphasized a corrective approach to inadequate behavior. The increasing importance given to prevention contributed to new definitions of indiscipline and, thus, misbehavior is conceptualized as a functional inadequacy of individuals to the context they belong to. The emphasis is, therefore, placed in the relationship of people and their environment; that is to say, the dissonant response neither arises entirely from student intrinsic factors, nor is it completely the result of extrinsic factors. Finally, the pedagogical approach to indiscipline focuses on the specific process which occurs in the classroom, emphasizing the teacher's action to establish discipline. Misbehavior, perceived as a "disorder originating from breaking the established rules and/or from classroom disruptions" (Estrela, 1992, p. 15) results from the teacher's lack of competence to organize and manage the classroom.

It was this last line of research that inaugurated, around 1980, the objective and systematic study of classroom indiscipline in Portugal. Influenced by Kounin and by the classroom management studies, this line of investigation, founded in Portugal by Maria Teresa Estrela, argued that teachers can prevent school indiscipline by building friendly environments. According to it teachers will more easily prevent disruptive situations if, for instance, they maintain their attention spread over the entire class, send signals to the class conveying that they are 'controlling the situation' (that they 'have eyes on their back'), elaborate smooth transitions between activities or transmit clear expectations.

The present study stands at the intersection of the pedagogical and the psychological approaches. It adopts both the pedagogical definition of indiscipline, which emphasizes the teacher's role in promoting successful classroom relationships, and psychological notions such as the influence of in-class stimuli for disciplinary practices, a developmental perspective of students, and the importance of educational and self-efficacy beliefs to the understanding of social phenomena. Therefore, this study

attempts to identify teacher and student conceptions of classroom indiscipline and to understand if they see the School as going through a major indiscipline crisis.

METHOD

The methodological design followed a descriptive and comparative approach with a quantitative emphasis. Subjects were inquired through a questionnaire and the data gathered was analyzed according to descriptive statistics.

<u>Subjects</u>

The samples were constituted from the universe of teachers and students from the Basic (excluding the 1st Cycle), Secondary and Professional Education levels of the Azores region, according to non-proportional or Neyman stratification (Vicente, Reis & Ferrão, 1996). About 20% of the total number of students and teachers from each school was considered as the probable value (Ghiglione & Matalon, 2002) for the survey sample. Therefore, 336 teachers took part in this study, most being female (65.8%). It was also a relatively young group (85.7% of teachers aged 40 or younger); most of them had an education level equivalent to a Bachelor Degree (90.5%) and a relatively stable professional status (52.1% of teachers were part of the permanent staff of their school).

Regarding students, the total number of participants was 4,103[3]: 877 students from the 2nd Cycle (21.4% of the sample), 1,471 from the 3rd Cycle (35.9%), 1,446 from Secondary Education (35.2%) and finally 309 from Professional Education (7.5%). There was a slight predominance of female students (55.6%) in the overall sample, which corresponds to the numerical superiority of girls in each of the sub-samples considered. As for age, the predominant interval for each education level standed within the expectable values for a regular school progression; 75.4% of 2nd Cycle students were

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[3] In Portugal, the regular school system, organized in a total of 12 school years, is structured in 4 stages: 1st Cycle of Basic Education, constituting the first 4 school years (ages 6-10), 2nd Cycle of Basic Education, constituting 2 school years (ages 11-12), 3rd Cycle of Basic Education, comprising the last 3 years of compulsory school (ages 13-15), and finally the 4th stage called Secondary Education (ages 16-18). The 3 years of this last stage precede the entrance into higher education or into the labor market with a more general education. In parallel, there is Professional Education, which is also aimed at all students who have completed the 3rd Cycle of Basic Education with success, but do not wish to follow an essentially academic curriculum (Secondary Education). In this case, students can opt for a more technical and practical curriculum, and when they conclude it, they can either enter the labor market, with a diploma, or continue studying in higher education. At the time this study, students aged 15 or older, who had not completed with success the 3rd Cycle of Basic Education and who intended to obtain a professional education, could also enroll. Today it represents an even larger range of education profiles with a professional nature.

aged 10-12; 67.2% of 3rd Cycle students were aged 13-15; 69.8% of Secondary Education students were aged 16-18; in Professional Education, the predominant age groups corresponded to the 13-15 (36.9%) and 16-18 (33.9%) intervals. In terms of education expectations, expressed in the intention of continuing to study, different patterns of responding were found between regular and professional education students. The will of achieving more advanced education levels paralleled student progression in school. In other words, the higher the level in the school system, the bigger was the proportion of students who declared their interest in continuing to study (53.9% in the 2nd Cycle, 64.6% in the 3rd Cycle and 69.6% in Secondary Education). The expectations of Professional Education students tended more to an integration into the labor market (61.8%).

MATERIAL

A questionnaire was the method selected to gather data. Underlying that choice were the traditional advantages associated with the use of questionnaires, such as the economic benefits of addressing a large and geographically dispersed sample. To minimize some of the limitations associated with the use of questionnaires (Ghiglione & Matalon, 2002), we tried to create a questionnaire's structure and organization sensitive to the linguistic and socio-cognitive characteristics of participants. Additionally, a pretest was carried out in order to improve the value of the questionnaire. With respect to the administration of the questionnaire, an instruction sheet was created to help collaborators in the process of data collection.

Through the questionnaire we tried to identify how students and teachers represented the concept of indiscipline, which undisciplined behaviors they experienced more often, and which incidents they considered to be more serious. We also tried to understand in which contexts misbehavior occurred most. Finally, we tried to clarify the disciplinary procedures adopted by teachers when confronted with more acute situations and the self-efficacy beliefs associated to those procedures. The answers obtained were then classified according to a previously constructed and validated category system.

Therefore, the information gathered for **indiscipline** was classified in one of the following categories: (1) Classroom Disruption, (2) Rule Breaking, (3) Collision with the Other, (4) Social Conventions, (5) Dislocations and Movements, (6) Noises, (7) Misbehaving, (8) Distractions and Entertainments and (9) Does not know / Does not answer / Does not apply.

Conceptions about **frequent indiscipline** and **serious indiscipline** were categorized in: (1) Distractions and Entertainments, (2) Dislocations and Movements, (3) Student-Student Relationship, (4) Social Conventions, (5) Noises, (6) Student-Teacher Relationship, (7) Work, (8) Does not have and (9) Does not know / Does not answer / Does not apply.

The identification of **the contexts in which indiscipline occurred most** was made through a system of five categories: (1) The Beginning of the Class, (2) Main Activity, (3) Main Activity / Individual Behavior, (4) Main Activity / Group Behavior and (5) The End of the Class.

Disciplinary Procedures pointed out by teachers were organized in four categories: (1) Punishment, (2) Corrective Reprehension, (3) Censoring Reprehension and the possibility of preventive action and (4) Prevention.

Finally, teachers' **self-efficacy beliefs** were classified according to three categories: (1) Efficacious, (2) Doubts about its Efficacy and (3) Inefficacious.

Procedure

As previously stated, the questionnaire was passed in the schools of the Azores with the help of collaborators who used an instructions sheet to ensure the adoption of a common set of rules by all participants in the study.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The analysis and discussion of the results will be made in the following order: teacher conceptions, student conceptions and comparison of teacher and student conceptions.

For each set of questions – conceptions of indiscipline, frequency and seriousness of indiscipline, periods/situation more propitious for serious indiscipline and teachers' self-efficacy beliefs – only the categories which received more then 10% of answers are mentioned.

Teacher conceptions

Teachers represent indiscipline making use of essentially three categories: *rule breaking* (35.1%), *school/classroom disruption* or damaging the teaching-learning

environment (23.5%), and *collision with the other* or the compromise of relationships between people at school (23.5%).

Regarding frequent indiscipline in class, teachers selected student *distractions and entertainments* (23.8%), *social conventions* or breaking what is conventionally established (20.8%), and *student-student relationship* (11.3%). It is also worth noting that a significant proportion of teachers (18.1%) declared not having to deal with frequent misbehavior.

Most teachers (50.6%) said that serious indiscipline does not take place in their classrooms. Those who had experienced events of serious misbehavior placed them in the relationship and communication category, either between teacher and student(s) (73.5%), or between students themselves (20.2%). They considered that such situations normally occurred during the class's main activity, involving one student or a small group of students (73.5%). The disciplinary procedures adopted were predominantly characterized by a negative approach (*punishment* (58.6%); *censoring reprehension* (15.0%)) although a positive note (*corrective reprehension* – 22.6%) was also present in their answers. The assessment teachers made of their intervention when faced with serious classroom indiscipline was considered efficacious by the majority (69.0%), of doubtful efficacy by some (20.4%), and inefficacious by a smaller number of them (10.6%).

Student conceptions

The prevailing conceptions of indiscipline among students fell within two categories: *collision with the other* (44.1%) and *misbehaviour* (25.4%). There was a relatively large proportion of students who did not answer (34.7%).

This orientation was also found when each cycle/type of education sub-samples was analyzed individually. In those cases students definitions of indiscipline focused first on conflicts with others, followed by the general idea of misbehaving or evildoing. Conception of indiscipline as a relational conflict accompanied the progression of students in school (2nd Cycle – 31.1%; 3rd Cycle – 38.5%; Secondary Education – 53.2%), and reached its highest value (55.2%) in Professional Education. Regarding conceptions of indiscipline as misbehavior or evildoing, the opposite tendency was found: *misbehavior* was the option more common among Basic Education students (2nd

Cycle – 31.1%; 3rd Cycle – 29.4%), and was appointed less by Secondary (20.1%) and Professional Education (19.5%) students.

In terms of frequent indiscipline, more then 20% of students, regardless of cycle/type of education, did not perceive themselves as permanent transgressors (22.1%). When the categories *does not have* and *does not know/does not answer* were added the proportion more then doubled (46.1%), reinforcing the idea that these students do not generally see themselves as performers of continued misbehavior. Students who admitted being persistent transgressors, believed that *distractions and entertainments* (19.8%) and incidents in their *relationship with teachers* (14.6%) were the most frequent types of disruptive behavior. Data for each cycle/type of education followed the trend observed in results obtained for the whole sample.

Conceptions of serious indiscipline followed the same tendency with many students saying that they had never displayed a seriously unappropriate behavior (40.6%). If the absence of an answer (35.5%) could be considered as an indication of no incidents to report, then the percentage of students who think that they did not misbehave raises sharply (76.1%). When students admitted having already taken part in serious classroom incidents they considered that it had involved *the relationship with the teacher* (12.3%). The analysis of students' answers according to their cycle/type of education showed that serious disruptions were more common among Professional Education students (18.8%), followed by 3rd Cycle students (11.8%) and 2nd Cycle students (9.5%). These situations occurred mostly during the class's main activity, involving a student or a small group of students (87.1%).

The relationship between seriousness of indiscipline and students' educational expectations - indecision, the will of entering the labor market (after the 9th or 12th grades) and the will of continuing to study - was also surveyed. Contrary to what was expected, the group of students who intended to continue studying was responsible for the largest percentage of serious misbehavior (56.2%), followed by those who wished to leave school and enter the labor market (31.8%) and by students who had not yet made their decision (12.0%). Acknowledging that indiscipline can easily and abusively be associated to situations of early school drop out, further attention should be given to this aspect of data.

Finally, an analysis of conceptions of indiscipline according to the geographical disposition of the islands showed that there were no differences pertaining to the

category occupying the first place – incidents in the *relationship between teacher and student(s)*.

Nonetheless, it was the group of students living in the western group[4] – the most remote from the three groups and the one with the smallest area, population and socio-economic development – who believed that teacher-student conflicts apparently assumed more relevance (16.7%, against 12.8% for the eastern group and 10.9% for the central group). This disposition of data seems to diverge from that obtained in the Portuguese mainland, where the most acute misbehavior took place in areas with a larger demographic concentration and greater socio-economic development (Veiga, 1995).

Teacher vs. student conceptions

When teacher and student conceptions of each aspect previously studied were compared, convergences seem to far exceed divergences. Indiscipline appeared to be the concept where more disagreement between teachers and students can be found. Teachers tended to give more relevance to *rule braking*, *classroom disruptions* and *collision with the other*, while students selected *collision with the other* and *misbehaving/evildoing* more often. We could consider, though on a rather speculative way, that this dissonance was due to students' answers being not clear and precise. On the other hand, the convergence found on the relational dimension was quite significant - the category *collision with the other* was referred to quite often by both teachers (23.4%) and students (44.1%).

Regarding the frequency of indiscipline episodes in classroom, the proportion of teachers who said that they did not have to regularly deal with rule braking or classroom disruption (18.1%) was relatively close to the number of students who did not place themselves in a level of continued misbehavior (22.1%); hence, teachers and students tended to coincide in their appreciation of the number of times they had been involved in situations of indiscipline. When elements from both groups mentioned frequent indiscipline, they used either more common or less central categories. This is the case for *distractions and entertainments* (teachers – 23.8%; students – 19.8%), as well as for categories pertaining to the communication and the relationships between individuals in the classroom (teachers – 11.3%; students – 14.6%). Nevertheless, while teachers

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[4] The islands are normally referred to according to their proximity, and a division between three groups is common: eastern, central and western.

centered their apprehension in the relationship between students, students emphasized incidents in student-teacher relationships. The frequency of *transgressions of what is conventionally established* was seen quite differently by teachers (20.8% considered it was the more frequent form of disruption) and students (less than 10% found it a frequent problem).

Teachers and students also agreed with respect to the kind of misbehavior they believed was the most serious. About half of the former (50.6%) said that they had not experienced acute disruptions in their classes, and almost half of the latter (40.6%) also reported not having ever displayed acute misbehavior. Teachers and students who had experienced serious indiscipline also agreed on the causes of disruption: disturbance in the relationship between people at school, especially between student(s) and teacher (teachers – 20.2%; students – 12.3%). These situations, nonetheless, were not perceived as a group manifestation, but rather as an individual (teacher-student) or small group (teacher-students) phenomenon (teachers – 73.5%; students – 87.1%).

CONCLUSION

Similar to results from other studies conducted in the Azores (Caldeira, 2000; Condessa, Rego & Caldeira, 2003), data gathered in this study allow us to conclude that Azorean schools are peaceful places where acute disruptions only takes place occasionally. In fact, the current findings stand far from more serious situations of alcohol and drug consumption, involuntary and unwanted pregnancy, suicide and general violence problems described in studies conducted in others contexts and countries (Dosick, 1997, cited by Veiga, 1999). As such, and given the emphasis placed by students and teachers on the relational aspects of classroom life, it seems to exist the ideal scenario to implement a preventive approach. There are, indeed, ways of approaching the problem of school discipline which point to the need of studying, preferably in context, attitudes, competences and communication processes (Diaz-Aguado, 1996; Fernández, 2001; Veiga, 1999). In addition, analysis of students' relationships as a function of their progress in school and of the type of curriculum they are enrolled in might shed some light into the relationship between educational programs available and their relevance for students' lives. In this case the role of vocational counseling would be considerable.

It should be noted, nonetheless, that teachers and students have considered that schools do not have indiscipline, disruption or significant transgression. This seems to demystify the idea of a *School in Crisis* and rather constitutes an alert for the effects that some negative discourses about teachers and students, as well as schools' academic and social function, may have on society. Regarding this it would be worth keeping in mind Robert Rosenthal's work on the Pygmalion Effect (1968).

Research results suggest, in all cases, the rejection of negative and stigmatizing discourses. In the current case, and in view of the findings, to insist in diffusing pessimistic ideas about School is not only taking the part for the whole, but also developing an unfair suspicious attitude towards all of those who work there. Without disregarding the need for justified interventions, which must necessarily be ecological and aim at building friendly environments in schools, it is import to promote positive speeches and practices. After all, a balanced educational system reflects and is the reflex of a balanced society.

Indisciplina Escolar
¿Una realidad preocupante o una generalización abusiva?

Resumen

El presente trabajo, sobre las concepciones de profesores y de alumnos sobre la indisciplina escolar, intenta contribuir a aclarar la intensidad de esta problemática en las escuelas portuguesas, en particular en las escuelas del archipiélago de las Azores.

Hoy en día se tiende a la idea de que *toda escuela es indisciplinada*, que la escuela funciona, cada vez más, como un lugar de aprendizaje de comportamientos de ruptura, en vez de funcionar como un lugar impulsor de nuevas e interesantes estructuras para el proyecto de vida del alumno. Sin embargo, esta concepción encierra por lo menos dos tipos de peligro (1) el peligro de que se cumpla una profecía auto-realizada, y (2) el peligro de que represente una injusticia para profesores y alumnos, si se lleva a casos singulares y localizados que, naturalmente, no hacen la norma.

Datos recogidos en las Azores, a semejanza de lo que se encuentra en otros trabajos de investigación, tienden a circunscribir las dimensiones de este fenómeno y a considerar abusivo el discurso que apunta hacia la generalización de la perturbación en el medio escolar.

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