



MANAGING AND HANDLING INDISCIPLINE IN SCHOOLS

A RESEARCH PROJECT

ISABEL FREIRE, UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA

JOÃO AMADO, UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA

ABSTRACT

The research project we present here in (entitled GERLINDES, in Portuguese) is set out with the assumption that there is a link among the representations and the actions within the members of the interstitial groups of schools, the practices in action and social and disciplinary environment at schools. This research project is focused on eight case studies held in schools of different grades, located in the centre of Portugal. Both qualitative (interviews and ethnographic observation) and quantitative methodologies (pupils' questionnaires) have been used.

KEYWORDS

Indiscipline ; School ethos ; Violence ; Case studies

INDISCIPLINE GLANCED THROUGH A PEDAGOGICAL AND ORGANISATIONAL SCOPE

School indiscipline has been, over time, an issue of concern for educators and we can even state that it has become a huge concern among educators, policy-makers and the public opinion in general, owing to the outbreak of aggressiveness among peers, violence within teacher-student relationship and vandalism, as well.

Indiscipline is a multifaceted phenomenon, regarding its displays and causes, as well as its “meanings” and “functions” in the social, psychosocial and pedagogical fields. Concerning the displays, we believe that major situations are framed in what Amado and Freire (2009) points out as the “first level of indiscipline”: those incidents of “disruptive” nature whose “disturbance” affects the “good classroom functioning”. The incidents that might be framed in the second and third levels, are “conflicts among peers” and “conflicts within teacher-student relationship”, which might be taken on proportions of violence and even delinquency, the latter presents a minor frequency than the former (Amado, 2005).

Concerning the causes, we can distinguish, among others, those related to student’s idiosyncrasies, his/her social and family context, external influences and of social, economic, cultural, generational nature, etc., those related to the personality and professionalism of the teacher, and those associated with school as an organisation or the educational system as a whole.

The social, psychosocial and pedagogical “meanings” and “functions” of these actions should take, primarily, in account the “level” within their displays are situated. The contextual analysis of the actions of indiscipline, in a broader meaning, conferred herein, reveals that such behaviours are not always “offensive” (as general opinion does believe), but also “defensive” as a student’s shield to protect his/her image and “dignity”, or as a strategy of “maintenance” and “survival” towards physical, psychic and moral rhythms and constraints of school and of the classroom (Amado, 2001).

There are already many national and international scientific studies about this issue, approaching the pedagogical dimension and considering variables attached to the classroom; in Portugal, empirical researches considering school as whole are lacking. Since the pioneer study of Rutter *et al.* (1979), a lot of authors have emphasised the link between the display of disciplinary problems (including violence) and the *ethos* which is being lived inside schools.

This *ethos or school environment* (Blaya, 2002) linked to cumulative effects of a set of variables is translated into attitudes, values, behaviours and practices that become a distinctive mark of the school as a whole and is closely rooted in interpersonal relationships that are made between the various protagonists of a school, individually and collectively is (Freire, 2001).

In the present project, we intend to emphasise, the factors connected with school as organisation and the relational climate within it. We will also be attentive to the fact that, nowadays, Portuguese schools are enlarged organisations¹, what turns their functioning and interpersonal relationships more complex and brings up a new and unexplored field of study and research.

Schools are “complex, formal organisations that, as such, include behaviours of diverse actors, organised and interconnected by a structure of authority and a network of relationships that allow partial and unfinished information, resources and products pass from one group to another” (Bates and Murray, 1981, 58). According to these authors, school is structurally grouped in two kinds – the “elementary groups” and the “interstitial groups”. The former constitutes “basic structural elements” or “social units” (for example, the class, the group of teachers of a certain subject or field of knowledge, the administrative sector, etc.), while the latter, formed by the representatives of the elementary groups, are “connexion groups” which origin a network of links in the system’s structure (for example, the pedagogical council, the school and/or school group assembly, the class councils, the board of the parents’ association). It is inside these interstitial groups that the contact between the members of the isolated elementary groups is established.

Research has not given much attention to the role of the interstitial groups, although the organisation of schools in the Portuguese educational system assigns them a strong leading role. The organisation of these groups, established in Portuguese schools, holds a potential of collective work to promoting a favourable school environment to students’ learning and teachers’ professional development, which has not been well used in many of them, particularly those “more troublesome”. Moreover, school organisation in enlarged groups creates another structural level and new relational dynamics that leads to a complexity of networks and the appearance of new “connexion groups” whose reflection on schools’ functioning, urges to be acquainted with, particularly, in the disciplinary field.

¹ Portuguese schools are organised in clusters of schools of different levels of education, with joint leadership and management.

So, we consider vital, starting from the hypothetical assumption that, what happens in the interstitial groups and how decisions are made within them, are perceived in the elementary groups (namely in class and in teachers' councils), what constitutes essential aspects of school's life understanding, particularly, its relational and disciplinary dimensions.

We are also aware of a lack of knowledge about the prevention and treatment of indiscipline as far as the Portuguese schools are concerned, more evidenced in primary schools. In the present project, we have established as focus the understanding of disciplinary and violence problems in primary and secondary schools.

Our study is based on the analysis of the representations of leaders of different interstitial groups about school's relational climate, its connexion to the disciplinary issue and the students' school progress. Observation strategies are also used to perceive pedagogical and relational dynamics inside classrooms, in playgrounds and in different spaces of collective life.

So as to develop this project, we encompass a set of perspectives, besides complementary, what allows a better access to this complex object of study as indiscipline is considered amidst its "levels" and expressions.

Our approach to school indiscipline is pedagogical, because its study is centred in the dynamics round teaching and educating, and its impact in students' learning. It will also be a preventive approach, denying common sense, indiscipline is difficult to "overcome", the bet on research should involve the (ac) knowledge(ment) of the "good practices" that might be carried out in certain schools and classrooms. It is certain that this perspective has already been introduced in research, focusing the teacher as an individual or his/her training (e.g., Brophy & Good, 1986) and sometimes on school as a whole (e.g., Reynolds, 1989). However, we think that, in Portugal, this issue lacks some deepening and its complexity should not be undermined to mere explanations of psychological or sociological nature. We intend to realize how the different structures contribute and are related with the construction of a favourable environment and positive human relations, promoting welfare and school learning. In an ecological reading of school reality, we will be attentive to the factors connected with the environments where people (students and teachers) directly participate and the connexions and interconnexions that are established among multiple environments, influencing decisively people's lives in the systems in which they participate (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

Thus, this research tries to answer the following research questions:

- Which characteristics of school relational climate are associated with a good management of disciplinary problems?
- How do the different actors perceive school's disciplinary environment? What is the coherence between the ways of thinking of different actors?
- What kind of practices is used in schools in order to prevent and deal with indiscipline (including violence)? Which effects are associated with?
- Which differences are verified between the displays of indiscipline observed in different schools, which are being studied, having in account schooling cycles?
- What concerns do school leaderships and enlarged school groups express? What decisions do they make in the disciplinary field? How are several levels of decision encompassed? What is the role of the "interstitial structures" in the construction of school's disciplinary climate?

Finally, considering this issue, we can say that, in this project, besides being attentive to an hypothetical relationship between school's kind of leadership and the practices of preventing indiscipline and violence in school, we base our research on the assumption that there is a link between the representations and actions of the members of the interstitial structures, the practices widespread in schools and the disciplinary environment that is, in general, experienced within them.

METHODOLOGY

The case study suits the research strategy for the development of this project, and school the centre of analysis. Thus, the first step consisted of selecting eight case studies within schools situated in the centre of Portugal (Leiria, Caldas da Rainha, Pombal, Soure, Alcobaça and Ourém districts)². Six of these studies focus on primary education.

All of the case studies followed a common research design, preparing next stage, the multiple case studies. This stage of research is about finishing. The second stage's goal is to carry out a ramified multiple case study (Yin, 1989), considering the different dimensions under analysis, and also a unified case study, taking into account the nuclear aspects of the research, which are the

² These eight case studies are part of eight Master's theses (Ferreira, 2007; Henriques, 2007; Luciano, 2007; Prata, 2006; Rodrigues, 2007; Santos, 2007; Silva, 2007).

connections between the relational climate in schools, indiscipline and school achievement.

The semi directed interview was the technique of former choice for the data collection process. Direct observation, in the different educational contexts, was also performed (there was some difference between subprojects concerning this issue, an ethnographic observation was carried out in some of them). Documentation was also collected in order to characterize the case study schools and a questionnaire was answered by primary school pupils.

In each case, several school principals were interviewed (school directors, directors of school group assemblies and of the pedagogical council, PTA presidents, representatives of class coordinators, representatives of school janitors in the school group assembly, etc.); ethnographic observations were also performed in one of the primary schools and in middle school classes. The interviews' content analysis involves both a deductive (*a priori* categories, based on the Freire, 2001 categorization system) and inductive (*a posteriori* categories) categorization process. A seminar was held (in which all researchers collaborated) what allowed the comparison of data of each case, conferred greater “credibility” to the process and enabled a transversal interpretation of the data collected at this stage.

The second stage of the study, currently being developed, is the essential part of this project. Its development lies on a multiple case study logic whose main purpose is to emphasize common aspects and singularities observed in cases studied in the course of the previous stage.

In this presentation, we will focus on the process and the result of the content analysis of the information gathered through the sixty four interviews conducted in the eight schools in order to characterize the existing relational climate.

SCHOOL ETHOS – BUILDING A DATA ANALYSIS SYSTEM

As we have just mentioned, the process of analysis of the enormous amount of data collected from the semi directed interviews led to the grouping of information into themes or axis of analysis which translate different dimensions of the *ethos* of each case study school:

- Interpersonal relationships
- Disciplinary environment
- School-family-community relationship.

Some aspects of the treatment of information concerning the *Interpersonal Relationships* theme of analysis are exemplified below. On a future occasion, we will describe the global scheme of qualitative data analysis applied to the whole of the research.

RESULTAS : INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The analysis of data related to this dimension of schools' *ethos* was intended to ascertain the relational climate felt in each school at the level of different vectors involved (relationship among teachers; relationship among pupils; relationship between teachers and pupils; relationship between school janitors and pupils, etc.), in an attempt to ascertain the quality of relational climate.

RELATIONSHIP AMONG TEACHERS

The interviewees in these schools refer to *personal relationships* established with their peers and *professional relationships*. For each of these analysis subcategories, the information was organized in indicators, according to the positive, negative or conditional connotation conferred by the informants (Table I).

Using this system of analysis, we aim to – without altering the information provided by the interviewees – organize this information so as to allow a comparison of the climate in the different case-schools for the multiple case study stage, which will enable us to differentiate the *ethos* of these schools.

We believed, it was important in this and in other categories of analysis to identify indicators associated with positive and negative opinions and opinions we named conditional ones, as they emphasise a certain ambiguity or difference in interpreting experiences of a same reality.

As it is shown in Table I, there is a multiplicity of indicators, in which the diversity of indicators of positive and negative opinions, is rather well-balanced.

	Positive opinions	Negative opinions	Conditional opinions
Personal relationships	Personal contact/good relationship	Distant relationships/indifference	Depending on teachers
	Close/friendly relationships	Lack of interaction between teachers	Depending on school years
	Social Interaction	Lack of contact between teachers working in the morning and in the afternoon	Depending on subject
	No barriers between older/younger teachers	Lack of contact between primary school teachers and those of other school years.	
	Absence of problems/conflicts	Lack of transparency in personal relationships	
		Formation of different groups	
		Bad relationship	
Professional relationships	Cooperation	Lack of cooperation/individualism	Depending on the subject
	Collaboration	Dissatisfaction with the level of collaboration	
	Older teachers' support to younger teachers	Difficulty in taking part in interdisciplinary work	
	Interdisciplinary work	Lack of transparency in professional relationships	
	Occasional dialogue	Bad environment in work groups	
	Teachers' meetings	Sectioning of teachers into different groups	
	Sectorial meetings	Lack of commitment/routine	
	Emotional support	Lack of dialogue	
	Absence of problems	Not much participation	
	Good environment/reasonable environment	Work overload for some	
	Good relationships in the Class Council		

Table I – Relationships among teachers

TEACHER-PUPIL RELATIONSHIP

The analysis of the information concerning the relationship between teachers and pupils was made according to a similar scheme. However, in this case, the main categories of analysis were *personal relationships* and *authority relationships*, considering that between pupils and teachers there are relationships based on the different status institutionally given to each, closely related to the functions and roles they each perform in the system - the authority relationships. Besides these ones, there are often personal relationships that arise from the teacher(s) and the pupil(s) as individuals, aside hierarchic relationships. We are aware that the existence or absence of this kind of relationships may be of extreme importance in building a school's *ethos*. As it can be observed in Table II, the diversity of indicators conveying positive and negative opinions is also well-balanced in schools as a whole, what would probably be expected since it is a wide range of information. We

think this recurring characteristic in the analysis of most categories guarantees the validity of the system of analysis, which has been created what might help differentiating schools when they are being compared.

	Positive opinions	Negative opinions	Conditional opinions
Personal relationships	Close relationship	Pupils having trouble relating to teachers	Depending on classes/pupils
	Relationship based on positive retribution	Emotionally tense relationship	Depending on teachers' age
	Relationship beyond the pedagogical relationship	Little conflicts/small "misunderstandings"	Depending on teachers/Class tutors
	Relationship based on human rights	Bad relationship	
	Relationship based on the understanding of cultural differences	Lack of communication between teachers and pupils	
	Absence of racism	Disrespect for pupils	
	Good relationship	Relationship based on negative retribution	
	Absence of relationship problems/few relationship problems	Relationship based on cultural differences	
Authority relationship	Relationship based on passing down knowledge/rigor	Permissive leadership	Depending on teachers
	Relationship based on accepting/recognizing the teacher's authority	Autocratic leadership	
	Relationship without negative criticism and recrimination	Pupils not integrated in the pedagogical relationship	
	Relationship based on positive reinforcement	Relationship based on negative expectations	
	Open relationship (non imposing)	Leadership based on the power of pupils	
	Relationship based on the overcoming of negative expectations		

Table II – Relationships between teachers and pupils

The analysis of the **Disciplinary environment** theme aimed to grasp the way disciplinary action is put in practice (namely to understand the importance given to prevention), the awareness the different actors have of the normative system and the way they interpret indiscipline in school.

The purpose of the analysis of information relating the connexions among **School, Family** and **Community** was the identification of categories and indicators for a comparative analysis of schools so as to identify both the importance given to Parents and School Initiatives and characterize, the relationships established with the school surroundings (other educational institutions, municipalities and other social institutions).

PUPIL QUESTIONNAIRE

As it has been mentioned before, a questionnaire was also carried out with pupils of primary schools. It was intended to assess how pupils classify interpersonal relationships in their school (namely relationship with teachers and with peers), how they classify indiscipline and how they see themselves in the school environment (their behaviour, achievement, welfare, etc.).

The results available at this time (N=543) allow us to conclude that most pupils like attending school (about 80%), similar results to other studies about pupils' attitude towards school. We also know that in this sample there are about 13% of pupils who *are not happy when they go to school* and about 9,5% who *despite their efforts cannot do well*. The preliminary data point to some relevant differences between schools that are the object of this study. Regarding the indicator *not happy when coming to school*, there is an important difference between schools: the highest relative frequency is 22% of pupils and the lowest 7%. As far as the indicator *tries but cannot do well*, the relative frequencies vary between 3,7% (minimum) in one school and 17,9% in another (maximum). Where indiscipline is concerned in their schools, there are also some noticeable differences. Most pupils say there is indiscipline in their classroom, despite an important difference between a maximum of 78,7% in one school and a minimum of 60% in another. The schoolyard seems to be the environment where pupils often observe situations of indiscipline. The cafeteria seems to be the environment where more differences can be observed between schools at this level.

CONCLUSION

The study of multiple cases we are developing and the cross-sectional analysis of the different variables studied will surely point out the connexions between the *school ethos* and the behaviour and attitude of pupils towards school, as we intended. The results of the case studies already concluded, offer some guiding lines for the current stage of the research:

- there is likely to be a link between a cohesive *school ethos* and more adequate behaviours and attitudes in pupils;
- there is likely to be a link between a proactive and preventive disciplinary environment and less frequent occurrence of undisciplined behaviour;
- there is likely to be a link between inconsistent disciplinary action and/or disciplinary action based on punishment and control and more frequent occurrence of undisciplined behaviour in pupils.

We are a team of researchers³ conducting a collective effort to bring about a better understanding of the phenomenon of indiscipline in Portuguese schools based on consistent and thorough studies, methodologically grounded in mixed character approaches (combining qualitative and quantitative techniques).

³ The team is made up of researchers Isabel Freire and João Amado (scientific coordinators), Ana Sousa Ferreira (statistics consultant) and the teachers/researchers: Ana Luciano, Carla Santos, Elisabete Ferreira, Emília Silva, Maria da Conceição Prata, Natividade Rodrigues, Sónia Gonçalves and Sibila Henriques.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

AMADO, J. (2005). "Contextos e Formas da Violência Escolar". *Revista Portuguesa de História*, Separata, pp. 299-325. Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Coimbra, Tomo XXXVII.

AMADO, J. (2001). *Interação pedagógica e indisciplina na aula*. Porto: Edições ASA.

AMADO, J. e FREIRE, I. (2009). *Indisciplina(s) na escola. Compreender para prevenir*. Coimbra: Almedina.

BATES, F. & MURRAY, V. K. (1981). L'école, système de comportements, in A. BEAUDOT *Sociologie de l'école- pour une analyse de l'établissement scolaire*, pp. 53- 67, Paris: Dunod.

BLAYA, C. (2003). Elementos de reflexão a partir do comparativismo europeu, in *Desafios e alternativas: violências nas escolas. Anais do Seminário Internacional de Violências nas Escolas*, pp. 37-56, Brasília, UNESCO, 27-28 de Novembro de 2002.

BRONFENBRENNER, U. (1993). The Ecology of Cognitive Development: Research Models and Fugitive Findings, in R.H WOZNIAK & K.W. FISCHER. (Eds). *Development in Context. Acting and Thinking in Specific Environments*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

BROPHY, J., & GOOD, T. (1986). Teacher behaviour and student achievement, in M. WITTRICK (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3ª edição). New York: Macmillan.

FERREIRA, E. (2007). *Contextos, Pretextos e Protagonistas da (In)disciplina na Escola. Um estudo de caso numa Escola de 2º e 3º ciclo*. Dissertação de Mestrado, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Lisboa (xeroxed text).

FREIRE, I. (2001). *Percursos disciplinares e contextos escolares – Dois estudos de caso*. Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Lisboa.

HENRIQUES, S. (2007). *Indisciplina e Clima de escola. Estudo de caso n uma escola EB2,3/S*. Dissertação de Mestrado, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Lisboa.

LUCIANO, A. (2007). *(In)disciplina em Contexto Escolar. Estudo de caso numa escola do 1º ciclo*. Dissertação de Mestrado, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Lisboa.

PRATA, C. (2006). *O Fenómeno da Indisciplina numa Escola do 1º Ciclo do Ensino Básico*. Dissertação de Mestrado, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Lisboa.

REYNOLDS, D. (1989). Effective schools and pupil behaviour, in N. JONES (Ed.), *School management and pupil behaviour*, pp. 29-44. London: The Falmer Press.

RUTTER, M., et al. (1979). *Fifteen thousand hours. Secondary schools and their effects on children*. London: Open Books.

RODRIGUES, N. (2007). *Construção da Disciplina e Clima de Escola (Estudo de caso no 1º ciclo de uma Escola Básica Integrada)*. Dissertação de Mestrado, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Lisboa.

SANTOS, C. (2007). *Comportamento Disciplinar versus Clima de Escola. Um estudo de caso numa Escola do 1º Ciclo*. Dissertação de Mestrado, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Lisboa.

SILVA, E. (2007). *A Gestão da (In)disciplina. Perspectivas e práticas de diversos actores. Um estudo de caso no 1º CEB*. Dissertação de Mestrado, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Lisboa.

YIN, R. K. (1989). *Case study research. Design and methods*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.