

Bringing Together School and Family: Lessons from a Brazilian Experience

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Abstract

This paper examines the results of a methodology used with teachers for an inservice continuing education program aimed at strengthening school-family connections. The question guiding this research was, “Did the adoption of a constructive-collaborative model involving a university-school partnership and based on strengthening school-family relations promote the professional education of teachers, and if so, how?” An investigative and formative model was adopted based on practical rationality. Termed “constructive-collaborative,” it was chosen to promote and analyze interactions established between the university and school communities. Teaching conditions, school organization and functioning characteristics, and school practices were taken into consideration. It was assumed that teachers construct a knowledge base in the course of their professional development. In analyzed situations, we observed broad parental support for initiatives carried out by the school, as evidenced by large-scale participation in program activities. This response, in turn, generated great enthusiasm among the teachers, resulting in the continuation, improvement, and expansion of successful practices and programs. However, frequent changes in some local educational policies, implementation of new objectives in the schools, as well as the school district policy by which teachers are annually relocated (at present) were some of the observed difficulties in solidifying school-family connections.

Key Words: school-family relationships, university-school partnerships, teachers’ professional development, collaboration

Introduction

This paper examines the results of a set of three projects carried out by researchers from a Brazilian public institution (Universidade Federal de São Carlos) and teachers from public elementary schools situated in lower-income communities in a medium-sized city in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. A research and intervention methodology was used in an inservice continuing teacher education program aimed at strengthening school-family relationships.

The goals of the projects were twofold: to generate knowledge about the professional development processes of teachers, and to collaboratively construct strategies to bring together schools and the families of their students in order to foster learning. The basic research question guiding this study was: Does the adoption of a constructive-collaborative model involving a university-school partnership and based on strengthening school-family relationships promote the professional education of teachers, and, if so, how?

The objectives of the three projects involved the following:

1. Understanding how schools and families perceive their mutual relationship and how this can be improved,
2. Discovering how families, especially those with underachieving children, perceive schools and the work carried on in them,
3. Analyzing how the professional development of teachers is affected by situations in which school-family relations are improving, and
4. Analyzing university-school partnerships.

The research and intervention model adopted demands learning about the reality in which teachers work, identifying what they think about students and their families, understanding school-family interactions, and why teachers do what they do. Based on such of information, researchers and teachers can reflect collaboratively and, if necessary, construct strategies to deal with real situations, taking into consideration both school and community characteristics.

This model makes various assumptions (Mizukami et al., 2002), among them that learning to teach and actually becoming a teacher are processes based on multiple experiences and knowledge modes. These processes begin prior to formal teacher education and continue throughout the training period and, subsequently, develop throughout all the experience comprising a teacher's professional practice. This learning involves, among other elements, affective, cognitive, ethical, and performance factors (Cole & Knowles, 1993) in a process understood to be developmental, and demanding time and resources for teachers to modify their practices. Going beyond the learning of new

techniques, changes in teachers imply conceptual revisions of their individual educational and instructional process, including the theoretical framework of teaching itself. Teaching is a dynamic sequence of acts on the teachers' part, responsive to what happens in the classroom and in interactions with students, and is related to and takes place in an institutional context (Schoenfeld, 1997). Underlying these acts, we believe, is the teacher's knowledge base constituted by a set of understandings—specific areas of learning, skills, and attitudes—all of which enter into and hopefully ensure effective action in specific learning and teaching situations, as well as in the decision-making process (Schoenfeld; Shulman, 1986, 1987). When teachers teach, knowledge, beliefs, objectives, and hypotheses are fundamental elements in determining what is done and why it is done. Classroom practices are influenced by conceptions carried by each individual teacher regarding the subject matter taught, curricular content, the students, and learning.

We view collaboration as a key characteristic of the constructive-collaborative research model adopted, conceived of as a dialog and presupposing that teachers and researchers involved in this exchange perceive it as contributing to their professional development. Collaboration is conducive to mutual understanding and consensus, democratic decision-making, and common action (Clark et al., 1996; Clark, Herter, & Moss, 1998). It implies a tendency toward inquiry, whose fruit is the generation of new knowledge as a result of addressing daily concerns and problems experienced by teachers in the classroom. But this model also signifies that each partner in the inquiry process contributes with his or her acquired expertise, and that the relationship between classroom teacher and the university researcher, for example, is multifaceted and *not* overwhelmingly hierarchical (Cole & Knowles, 1993, p. 478). Finally, the interpretation of the data is conceived of as a collaborative act (Wasser & Bresler, 1996), in which multiple points of view are taken into account.

In the present paper, the aim is to analyze aspects of observed learning-to-teach processes, the formative strategies adopted, and teacher participation in searching for solutions to problems they themselves have identified within the context of both the culture and the local school. We also examine strategies adopted with the intention of intensifying school-family interactions and promoting successful learning. Based on these analyses, we present some ideas that hold the promise of improving the initial stages of teacher education. University-school relations are also discussed.

We first consider some aspects of a teacher's knowledge base and its relation to the way students and their learning are understood. Secondly, we analyze concepts about school-family relations within a specific Brazilian context. Next, we present the adopted methodological orientation and the main results

obtained. The final section focuses on what we believe are essential elements in promoting the professional development of teachers and in collaboratively constructing strategies through a university-school partnership to bring together schools and the families of their students in order to foster learning.

Theoretical Framework

School-Family Interactions and Teachers' Professional Development Processes

A growing body of literature on teacher learning and professional development emphasizes the kind of knowledge teachers should have, as well as the way beliefs developed throughout a lifetime influence pedagogical practices. We argue that the central goal of professional development programs should be the construction and expansion of the teacher's knowledge base.

Zeichner (1992) maintains that teachers require (a) an interest in learning about the characteristics of both the students and their communities; (b) the capacity to entertain high expectations with regard to the students; and (c) the skill to establish bridges between school-imparted knowledge and that which the students bring, so that the classroom contains cultural elements relevant to all student groups. Mastery of specific content, sociocultural knowledge, and using teaching strategies promoting active participation of the students are other important requirements. Above all, Zeichner emphasizes that teachers should consider classroom diversity as a *resource* rather than a *problem*.

With respect to students' families and their relationship to successful teaching, Perrenoud (2000) singles out as essential a teacher's competence in communicating with parents and involving them in their children's schooling. However, what we actually observe in the Brazilian context are, on one hand, concrete educational demands and, on the other, a growing distance between school education and that which is received in the home. As a consequence, some parents perceive themselves as lacking time and competence to educate or even take care of their children, and they have readily transferred this task to better-qualified professionals. Ideally, however, parent-teacher relations should represent some cohesion between school programs and the educational values and goals held by the parents. But rarely does parent-teacher dialog go on as if between equals, since parents customarily are deprived of the option of rejecting schooling.

According to Hargreaves, Earl, & Schmidt (2002), teacher-family partnerships, when not perceived as opportunities, sometimes represent a kind of threat to teachers since, as families better understand school practices, they

become more comfortable with analyzing and criticizing teaching and learning quality. (Needless to say, greater understanding about educational system policies, programs, and curriculum confers on teachers a larger share of the total responsibility.) Thus, while school-family interactions have become a “cliché in educational reforms” (Hargreaves et al., p. 79), family involvement and empowerment in school matters is another question. This development creates opportunities for families to influence both academic curriculum and the outcomes for their children. However, the strength of this new partnership depends on a two-way communication system: Teachers must learn with the parents of the student, and vice versa.

Our experience also shows a commonly established connection, made by both teachers and the school administration, between failure and student/family characteristics. In addition, we affirm that teachers act based on their perceptions and interpretations of what happens in their classrooms and in the school, which in turn depends on the contexts in which they work (Schoenfeld, 1997). These personal theories about classroom realities markedly define how an individual’s teaching process develops and how the teacher interacts with students and their families. According to Tann (1993), many ideas held by teachers are based on both common sense and the sum total of the knowledge and understanding individual teachers have gleaned from experience.

As researchers studying the formative, developmental professional processes occurring in schools, we consider that the previous ideas are valid for our own educational contexts. Data about school failure in Brazil make clear the urgency of teachers’ developing professional repertoires capable of responding to diverse realities and aiming at social inclusion of all their students. Teachers must be capable of adapting teaching strategies to students of varied cultural backgrounds, as well as to those stigmatized by a history of academic failure. Such a demand is complicated by Brazil’s highly diverse population in social, cultural, ethnic, religious, and economic terms.

Even the chances of completing elementary school (eight years) depend on the geographical region in which a Brazilian child is born. For example, in Salvador, Bahia, a child has the following probabilities: a 30% chance of not having a birth certificate; 40%, that his parents have had four years of schooling; 21%, that his parents are illiterate; 27%, that his family’s monthly earnings are below half the minimum salary (almost U.S. \$80.00) per capita; 17%, of having to work at as young as 10 years of age in order to help his family; 46%, to already be working by between the ages of 15 and 17 or not to have concluded elementary school because of family need; and 59%, of finishing elementary school although having had 95% likelihood of starting it (Spozati, 2000).

The 1990 statistics for average years of schooling indicate significant

differences with respect to student gender, ethnicity, and region. For schooling, women averaged 4.9 years and men, 5.1; Black students averaged 3.3 years, while White students averaged 5.9 years and Asian students, 8.6 years. Students in the Northeastern region attended approximately 3.3 years of schooling, while those living in the Southeast averaged 5.7 years (Ministério da Educação, 2001).

Results of the 2002 National Examination applied to high school students indicate that students have different background-related performances: Students from the public school system averaged 52.77 points while those in private schools scored 64.44 out of a possible 100 points. Results were worse for students from low-income families. Black students scored lowest when compared with White and Asian students. When the mother completely lacked formal schooling, 38.8 points were scored; students whose mothers had attained a college degree or beyond had an average score of 65.30 (INEP, 2003).

Although public educational policies were developed to change this picture with the establishment of the National Standards and the Teachers' Professional Standards, it is helpful to point out that few educational policies have effectively changed teachers' interpretation of the role of the family. Broadly stated, researchers and policy analysts now assume that parents, siblings, and extended families play an important role in education. One way to promote school success and to improve teaching to a diverse population such as Brazil's is to encourage continued education programs for teachers at the school level, particularly those promoting school-family collaboration.

School and the Role of the Family: A Brazilian View

Themes related to families and schools have been widely investigated in Brazil from different standpoints and in many theoretical and methodological perspectives. The strengthening of relations between schools and families is justified by the search for a way to deal with issues that affect the development of children and teenagers, pertaining to both socializing environments. This may help diminish the "conflict zone" experienced by both schools and families and promote students' success.

A survey of Brazilian literature on the subject indicates that among the prevalent beliefs held by parents is that schools can be relied on to know better than they, in any given case, what course of action to follow. Even in instances in which questions exist, opportunities to ask them rarely present themselves. Little interest is shown in discovering what parents hope for or want from the school for their children, and when information of this kind is uncovered, it is usually by indirect means. In our opinion, the absence of this channel of

communication must be addressed so that parents and teachers can participate in a dialog that can only benefit Brazilian students.

We believe in the importance of bringing schools and families together, taking into consideration and respecting their distinct characteristics and responsibilities, despite the fact that recent literature does not assert conclusively that families' practices influence the schooling process of Brazilian children and teenagers. It is important to point out that we assume that parent participation in the school should not take the place of the government's role in terms of accountability and financial support as pointed out by Carvalho (1998) nor in terms of its political responsibilities as asserted by Rossi (2001).

There is a set of theories about what a family is, but the parameters adopted to describe it and its relation to work, consumption, social mobility, and the state rarely contemplate the heterogeneity and singularities observed in the Brazilian society, as is the case of lower- and middle-income families (Bilac, 1995). Due to demographic composition aspects, such as the cultural and ethnic variety found in different regions of the country, as well as its history, many interpretations of "family" are possible in Brazil. As we consider the patterns of family formation, especially in urban areas, and particularly with low-income families, it seems to be impossible to define a representation of Brazil's universal family. Families are not identical to all observers and do not display the same characteristics. Moreover, there is a need to acknowledge the dynamic situation that currently exists. Social and environmental contexts are undergoing rapid transformation, and the concept of family cannot be taken as static and uniform any longer (Biasoli-Alves, 1994). According to Dias-da-Silva (1991), factors such as women working outside home, grandmothers living with daughters and their children without men, siblings with different fathers, and other family compositions characterize the changes in Brazil in the last decades (Sarti, 1997; Neder, 1998). So there is a tendency to speak of "families," or more precisely "Brazilian families," as we consider the diversity of the empirical models (Sarti, 1999).

Traditionally, the family has often been considered as the child's first socializing agency. It is responsible to promote favorable conditions for a "good" development (Ariés, 1981; Gomes, 1994). However, this idea cannot be generalized for all periods of history and all societies, or for all social classes. Nevertheless, in Brazil the family is still supposed to provide the child with a stable and loving environment (Szymanski, 1997). Regardless of this conceptual difficulty in defining the nature of the Brazilian family, its function must be valued as the locus of production of children's basic social identities, both individual and collective, as we consider the promotion of their active citizenship. Tolerance toward human diversity, especially on the part of social agents in the

fields of public education, health, social assistance, and security (Neder, 1998) are important variables to be considered. According to Sarti (1999), this recognition is fundamental to prevent educational actions from being standardized toward a single and rigid family model.

Some studies present the families' viewpoints, whether belonging to a lower income level or not, about the nature of the interactions established with schools, about their involvement, their investment in keeping their children at school, and about the function of the school and its practices (Almeida, 1999; Pauleto, et al., 1998; Reali & Tancredi, 1998, 2000, 2001; Reali, Tancredi, & Mattos, 2001; Romanelli, 1995; Tancredi, 1998; Tancredi & Reali, 2001a, 2001b; Thisted, 2000; Viana, 1995, 1999; Zago, 1995). But we need more research about what happens within families regarding their children's schooling process. We presume that it may be considered as an intricate collection of ideas, expectations, interactions, and routines from the families toward the school and the processes thereby developed. It seems that there are patterns deriving from personal and family experiences. We believe they constitute information that is unknown to school professionals, especially teachers, and this has not yet been explored in basic or continued teacher education programs.

Two points are indicated as important in numerous educational policies around the world, reflecting a general societal trend: (1) the intensification of school-family relations, and (2) the increased participation of parents as families becoming engaged in their children's schooling and in educational decision-making processes. In Brazil, there are sets of public educational policies in the federal and other spheres that point to the need for schools to make quality connections with their students' families and communities (Brasil, n.d.; Brasil, 1998; Secretaria de Estado de Educação de São Paulo, 1996).

As an example, the Pre-School National Standards point to the significance of linking the school and students' families and the importance of the school considering and respecting diverse families' configurations, cultures, values, and beliefs. The document suggests individualized, personal contacts between the school and students' parents, an exchange of information about the child, and the necessity to consider the student age in the adoption of various kinds of school-family relationship patterns (Brasil, 1998).

Despite these initiatives, we observe that Brazilian families are usually requested to get involved in school activities such as fundraising, to control their children's behavior and learning performance, and to help with their children's homework. Hardly ever are they invited to take part in the school's pedagogical projects, since they are frequently considered to have insufficient knowledge to constructively contribute to school actions. It seems that the school professionals—teachers and principals—consider the ideal relationship with

the students' families as one in which parents "support teachers' practices and schools in general, carry out requests, but do not interfere with plans and decisions" (Gareau & Sawatzky, 1995, p. 464). However, we propose that parent participation in the school would not result in negating the teacher and school roles and responsibilities, thus attributing only to the families the responsibility of providing their children with the conditions needed for social, emotional, and academic development (Carvalho, 1998, 2000).

By questioning why the school's interaction with their students' families is so fragile and subject to the difficulties often observed in the schools and reported by parents and teachers, we raised the hypothesis that these participants, however engaged in shared sociocultural tasks, may see themselves as being on opposite sides of the educational process. In spite of the fact that they share common objectives, their relationships may often be characterized as ambiguous, because of the absolute supremacy of the school over their relationship to the students' families. It is possible that because they do not really know each other, they reaffirm a situation that has prevailed for decades: The school thinks they know what students' families must be and do. To enforce this perception, the school calls for the families to control their children according to the school rules. However, families have their own ideas about what must be taught and learned in school, but they do not have an adequate and efficient communication channel. Additionally, the families seem not to perceive their position, due to the absence of opportunities to congregate and share their ideas and recognize the power they could have to influence the school.

We believe that schools must be responsible for the first steps toward improvement of the school-family relationship, taking into account its educational characteristics and nature. No interaction with the goal of joining schools and their students' families and communities should inhibit the families' individual and collective voice. The school-family partnership should not be just a strategy employed by teachers and school administrators to maintain professional control by co-opting parental support (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997).

Despite the evident complexity of the theme, we defend in our initiatives that all school-family interactions should be established based on each school's broader policies, social values, and its explicit recognition that valuing the parents' role is part of school education but cannot be a substitute for it. It is also important to take into account the characteristics that confer diverse task dimensions to the school, teachers, and students' families. We endorse, in the adopted perspective, that it is important to address the strengthening of school-family interactions with the purpose of improving students' school success.

The Research and Methodological Framework

We have adopted an investigative and formative model based on practical rationality, known as a constructive-collaborative model, to promote and analyze the interactions established between the university and the school communities. We believe that inservice teacher education programs should be adapted to specific schools, that the structure and content of these professional development programs should be determined by the schoolteachers themselves, and that, preferably, the training should occur at the workplace. This is important to help take into account the local characteristics—the multifaceted community of each school—in such a manner that teachers can better know their students and the students' families.

In this sense, the adopted model implies the understanding of the contribution of the diverse members of the group, their individual and collective ways of thinking and acting, their strengths and limits, and their underlying models of causality and causal inference (Argyris & Schön, 1996). One characteristic of the studies was that they produced a story about events as they occur in their natural settings, such as teachers' meetings, family interviews, observed school-family interactions, and program events. A second hallmark of the program was the effort made by the researchers to build a good rapport with the schoolteachers and the students' families. A third hallmark was our commitment to create a safe and open research environment in which the voices, opinions, and views of the different participants could emerge.

The research tools—questionnaires, interviews, and site observations—were used in succession to build general explanatory statements about the school-family relationship. It is important to note that the interviews and meetings with the teachers were important moments of inquiry, reflection, and collaboration, as well as occasions to characterize the teachers' thinking modes and learn why they think the way they do. These moments were, therefore, formative and investigative spaces for the promotion of professional development, which required personal and voluntary involvement in the proposed activities from the participants.

The analysis below draws on data from studies conducted between 1998-2002 which focused on working with inservice teacher education, examined school-family relationships, and was carried out in public K-8 schools in lower-income districts of a medium-size city in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. Although each one of the three projects had specific objectives, a general research question guided all of them: Did the adoption of a constructive-collaborative model involving a university-school partnership and based on the strengthening of school-family relations promote the professional education of teachers?

The first project was conducted with the objective of learning what responsibility schools have to families of children with past school failures and those in Accelerated (remedial) programs. The second project had the objective to help a preschool know their students' families better and to strengthen their school-family interactions. The third project had an objective to respond to families' interest in knowing more about what their children learn at school.

As a rule, each project began with the school's request to the university, followed by meetings between the researchers and teachers to establish a common work agenda. The work always began by eliciting the teachers' conceptions, usually through interviews conducted by the researchers, about their students, students' families, school-family interactions, and ways to improve these relationships. This preliminary phase guided the subsequent ones. The families were also interviewed, at school or at their homes, about the school's functions, the importance they attributed to the school, patterns of contact with the school and teachers, expectations regarding school-family interactions, etcetera. The information provided by the families was shared with the teachers in meetings conducted by the researchers. The events aimed at bringing the school and families together were collaboratively organized by the researchers and teachers. More specifically, the researchers were at the same time active participants and observers of the several steps in the development of the projects.

During the research development we usually had fortnightly meetings with the schoolteachers, lasting about one and a half hours each. Although the teacher participation in this kind of activity was voluntary, it was usually valued and encouraged by the school principal. In the three projects, the intervention research lasted approximately one and a half years each. In all cases, it was promoted as a special event with the teachers and students' families that offered important data about the school-family relationship. We also considered that the meetings and shared activities with the teachers constituted formative situations, as new knowledge was socially constructed through discussions about what each community defined as a problem to be investigated.

Most of the teachers with whom we worked may be considered experienced professionals, since they had been teaching for more than five years. In general, they had higher teacher education majors. Because they worked at public schools, they were all subject to precarious work situations: high teaching workload; large classes; little institutional time to prepare classes and study; low salaries; and the need of complementing their monthly income with other activities, not always related to teaching. It is important to note that for many Brazilian teachers their working conditions are sometimes adverse. For example, in the third study, many teachers worked in more than one school and had contact with almost 500 different students each week.

The first project involved two teachers of Acceleration Classes and their students' families (50). The children had grade-age discrepancy and unsuccessful school stories, often with a past of frequent change of schools—due to belonging to migrant families—and sequential retentions (some had attended the same grade more than three times). Interviews were conducted with 18 families in their homes to learn their conceptions about the school's function, school failure, and why they kept their children at school. It also involved the establishment of educational activities for the teachers, students, and families in order to bring these players together. The project lasted one school year.

The second project involved the 27 teachers of a K-6 school that also had specific programs for 7- to 14-year-olds during the day and for 10- to 14-year-olds in the evenings (6:00 to 10:00 p.m.), with a total of 650 students. The project involved the mapping of the teachers' and the families' conceptions about school-family interaction, the function of the school considering the service it provided, the alternatives to improve these relations, and how the parties perceived each other. In this case, 63 families and 27 teachers were interviewed about these topics. A folder was organized by the teachers in several meetings organized and conducted by the researchers about the theme "*Discipline or How to Establish Behavioral Limits*". It is important to note that the students' families suggested the folder theme. The folder content was discussed with the students' parents and relatives at an event aimed at bringing the school community together. In this case, the project duration was one and a half years.

The third project was carried out at a fifth through eighth grade elementary school that also offered programs for adults in the evening. In this case, after asking the families what they wanted to dialog about with the school (through the examination of 550 questionnaires corresponding to 30% of the students), the school decided to work with the theme "*The importance of what is learned at school,*" and an event was set up for this end. The 46 teachers, grouped according to the curricular content they taught, defined what the parents should know about the theme. The teachers' opinions were gained through questionnaires and observation of meetings between the teachers and the researchers. In this study, the researchers helped the schoolteachers design, apply, and analyze a questionnaire directed to their students' parents with the objective of defining what parents considered important to talk over with school professionals and the best way to accomplish such communication.

The data collection tools were primarily interviews and observation in all three studies. Interviews were semi-structured and followed a protocol developed to elicit information about specific themes related to each one of the studies. It is important to note that all the participants were encouraged to discuss or explore other related issues not directly associated with the interview

protocol. The university researchers were responsible for the teachers' interviews, which occurred at the school setting. Parent and family interviews were often conducted by graduate education students and held at the school students' houses, after parents received a letter explaining the study. In all cases, interviews were taperecorded and transcribed for analysis.

The field observations were a way to learn through exposure to or involvement in the school routine and to see teachers' contact with the students' families and their working practices. Interviews conducted in the families' homes were opportunities to document some important aspects about families' relationships with the school and with their children's educational process. In the schools, the observers paid attention to the aspects that were relevant to understanding the context variables and the interaction maintained by the school and their students' families in both the places where teachers usually talk with the parents and the teachers' working sites.

The data analysis process required a continuous movement between teacher education, school-family partnership, and school-university collaboration literature, considering data collection from different participants and the field notes about the diverse observed settings (school and students' homes).

Some Results

With the use of a collaborative and constructive model of research and intervention, the different projects can be centered on the analysis of the professional development of teachers as well on the university-school partnerships. The results were analyzed considering different points of view about the school-family partnerships and the observed professional development process.

Families' Point of View about the School and School-Family Interactions

In all three studies we noted through interview or questionnaire data that parents expressed great interest in the school and its educational processes (more than 70%), even those in lower income classes or having poor educational levels, or with children with a past history of school failure. They usually answered the school's invitation to participate in the programed activities. In the second study, for example, approximately 200 families (from the total 650 students) participated in the meetings promoted by the school. Yet in the interviews parents reported that they only came to the school when they were explicitly requested to do so, since they did not see themselves as participating members of the school community (88% in the first case; 73% in the second).

We observed in all the studies that, in many cases, parents were contacted by teachers at the school gate or in a corridor and forced to hear about their children's problems without any kind of privacy. Generally, the teachers' complaints or issues on these occasions referred to their children's behavior, seen as inadequate, or their insufficient academic performance, and the school expectation was that families could solve or improve those conditions. Almost all the parents and relatives in the studies indicated that the school and the teachers often adopted a communication form they did not fully understand. For example, written reports were sent to illiterate families, which required the help of other people and of the student him/herself to be interpreted.

In the first two studies the families indicated that they looked for ways to help with their children's homework and other academic activities. For instance, in the second study families indicated that they used creative ways to promote reading or mathematics, many of them not considered by the school, such as the use of advertisement flyers as instructional material. In the third study, the parents were questioned about topics they chose to discuss with their children's teachers. Even when offered the possibility of discussing themes relevant to their children's life (e.g., violence, drugs, TV, sexuality, etc.), almost 40% chose to talk about what was taught at the school instead, including different subject content. We think that this option denotes parental interest in their children's schooling process. In distinct situations considered in the three studies, the parents demonstrated interest and a desire to better understand the pedagogical work carried out by the school and to take an active part in several school activities, specifically their social role.

Teachers' Point of View about Students' Families and School-Family Interactions

Most (80%) of the teachers participating in this research in the three school communities indicated their belief that the students' families were not interested in their children's schooling process and that parents stayed apart from the education carried out by the school or even confronted it. The teachers underestimated the parents' investment in educational issues, particularly their ability to understand what was taught at school. This was more evident in the first and third studies.

In the second study we noted that some teachers' opinions about the families were biased and based on beliefs possibly established when they began teaching at the school. Our data suggest that other teachers show stereotyped opinions about families, seemingly related to the former characteristics of the communities where the students live, that is, neighborhoods with poor, lower

per capita income, little schooling, and many migrant and unemployed people. Many teachers were prone to attribute negative characteristics to most of their students' families, even though these characteristics were actually present in just a very small group of them. This certainly influenced school-family interactions, despite the fact that the neighborhood and the school community have recently experienced changing characteristics.

We observed that there were shared beliefs at the schools that had been established from individual beliefs and from those more directly related to the school history and the economic and cultural contexts of the community. Our data are restricted to schools in lower-income neighborhoods, which do not allow any generalization to be made. Nonetheless, our experience with other educational situations shows that many teachers associate their negative views of school context with students' academic failure. This opinion may be extended to other Brazilian contexts.

In the third study some teachers indicated that the students' parents are conceived as incapable of fully understanding what is taught at school (37%), and not all school knowledge is considered to be relevant to this population (13%). The way the event was devised and managed reiterates these conceptions: The parents were submitted to the teachers' perceptions in regard to what they thought the students should learn at school. Apparently, the teachers expect the parents' passive acceptance of the school's teaching and their active support of the school's actions.

Considering the data obtained in these projects, we can affirm that the teachers' conceptions about the students and their families do not necessarily correspond to their real characteristics. This may be attributed to the fact that school-family interactions were tenuous and not always favoring reciprocal understanding. It is also important to consider the lack of opportunities provided by the school organization to help the teachers (re)construct their professional knowledge base and eventually change their opinion about their students and their families.

School-Family Interaction Observed: Some Notes

Our observational data and field notes confirmed what the teachers and parents reported about communication. The contact between the school and the families often occurred through written notes carried by the students, who acted as go-betweens; meetings between families and teachers lasted just a few minutes and took place before or after classes, especially when the students were underage; meetings occurred at the classroom doors or in hallways when parents were requested to come to the school; and bi-monthly meetings were

held to consider the students' performance and other school announcements. Seldom did the parents feel encouraged to come to the school on their own. It was, on the whole, a unilateral interaction, since it was the school's prerogative to get in touch with the families, to define the topic of the conversation, and to establish the duration and adopted language of the communication.

Most teachers do not recognize clearly the importance of establishing interactions with their students' families in order to be able to learn who they are, what they expect from the school, and how they can be encouraged to actively participate in their children's schooling process. The teachers' daily burdens may interfere with the construction of conceptions about this interaction and with practices that promote family involvement in the school. It is important to point out that this theme isn't often discussed or taught in the preservice programs relevant to our context. However, in all three studies we noted the enthusiasm of the teachers when they noticed the parents were participating in an active way and responding to the "new" school demands, including the interviews, the questionnaires, and the events.

Based on this background, we consider it important that the school invest in learning about students' families, since what the teachers think about them influences the relations they establish with the students in their classroom practices. We believe it is necessary to know how beliefs about students and their families are established and maintained through time, in order to change any faulty beliefs through continued teacher education programs at the schools. It is also important that the teachers have better working conditions, including time and space to turn more attention to their students and their families: who they are, how they live, what they think, and how this affects their children's education.

The Researcher's Point of View about Teachers' Professional Development

As the projects developed we began to consider the meetings and events as unique moments to collectively (researchers, schoolteachers, and families) elicit conceptions and to analyze and eventually change the participants' ideas. Apparently, these changes and the time they demanded were not the same for all participants. The reason for these differences is not clear. We noticed that the meetings and events were enriching moments for establishing dialog, sharing knowledge, getting in contact with new and unexplored ideas, and getting to know one's peers and their conceptions. We suppose that these differences are due to various personal dispositions toward change and other personal characteristics. For instance, we observed a greater involvement of those teachers that

had already experienced situations, not necessarily school-related, in which collaboration was a key factor in achieving the desired results.

Nevertheless, we also observed in these processes some resistance on the part of some teachers in getting engaged in the construction of the interventions with the families. Their behavior led the university researchers to believe that they expected us to formulate the proposals, despite their knowing before joining the program how the work would be carried out. Intriguingly, this situation seems to be paradoxical, due to teachers' criticism against public educational policies that, in their opinion, do not usually empower them and do not actually provide the means for their effective implementation. It seemed that the commitment assumed collectively by the school and the other teachers was not their own. However, we must not dismiss the bad working conditions for many of them and the barrier this presents for them.

We believe that because implementation processes may suffer distinct influences—from the school administration, from peers, from lack of acceptance by the group, from not wanting to be explicitly different—which interfere with the development of the work, it may result in different levels of commitment. It is also important to point out that possibly some teachers were expecting a different model of a university-school relationship based on technical rationality and where “our” role was to prescribe their actions in place of a collective construction. They expected, probably, the same kind of relationship they were used to having.

Some difficulties were observed related to school organization and the meetings between the teachers and researchers. In general, some of the teacher's weekly schedule was to include time to meet with researchers. However, urgent demands by the school administration and pedagogical coordination often used up the time set apart to discuss issues related to project development. This aspect made it difficult to follow the programmed schedule. A further obstacle was that some teachers had other professional duties, such as teaching at other schools, which restrained their full participation in the project in spite of the fact that they were being paid for it, evidenced in the case of the K-6 school.

In the three situations analyzed, we observed a broad parental adherence to the initiatives carried out by the school, evidenced by their large presence and participation in the proposed activities. We noticed, in these circumstances, a lot of enthusiasm by the teachers to carry on, improve, or expand these initiatives. However, aspects related to the discontinuity of some local educational policies, the implementation of new school objectives, as well as the annual relocation of teachers around the local schools implied starting academic activities almost from scratch. These school organizational characteristics limit long-term experiences such as the one we are discussing.

From the beginning, we supposed that the continuity of the approximation program could be facilitated by the longer presence of the university-researchers at the school. Nevertheless, some non-controlled variables intervened to prevent this possibility in spite of our wishes. It seems that the teachers' enthusiasm didn't survive the urgencies at school, and they were unable to be involved in longer duration projects which demand a high personal involvement and hold few possibilities of meeting the expectations of all the teacher participants. Finally, we could not conduct follow-up studies to evaluate the lasting effects of the different experiences in the school as an organization and in the teachers individually. Thus, little can be said about the real changes that occurred in the culture of school-family interactions.

Final Considerations

Several points emerge from the data presented here. We assumed that the schoolteachers' knowledge about the students and their families, when elicited and confronted with that of their colleagues, would foster the search for strategies aimed at strengthening school-family interactions. The ideal school-family interaction should consist of a type of bilateral communication, appropriately initiated by the school. Not only should it address school problems, but also the way of life of children and teenagers, considering who they are, what they like, etcetera (Bhering & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). In order to reach this interaction level, the school should help its teachers get to know their students' families better, as well as provide the families with space and information in order to be able to approach the school more confidently. We assert that the initial, formative teacher education programs must develop this issue of the teacher's professional relationship with varied members of the school community.

The absence of an adequate school space and information may give the families the impression that their opinions and knowledge are undesirable and without value to the school professionals, which keeps families away or makes them feel uncomfortable at their own children's school (Jasis, 2000). Through a process of *silent agreement*, the families, even against their own will (Miceli, 2000), can endorse the teachers' perception/belief that they are uninterested and incompetent regarding their children's school education.

Considering the diversity of contexts and characteristics, it may not be reasonable to establish fixed rules for school-family communication, nor to propose a sole interaction model or even define a single parental role pattern concerning school matters. School-family relations, given their complexity, should be dealt with taking specific contexts into consideration. Schools are not all alike—despite being ruled by the same laws and regulations and having

common objectives—and family environments are quite distinctive, in spite of their apparent resemblance. These differences, which make every family and school idiosyncratic units, should be respected; thus school-family interactions should be recognized as distinctive. When their singularities are taken into account, it is possible to rise above their peculiarities to reach a common goal, which is, in principle, that of improving the quality of students' learning.

Unfortunately, we observe that public policies seldom take these factors into account. They prescribe what should be done without considering the contexts, the players, the proposals already existing at the schools, their histories, or their teachers' previous conceptions and time constraints. They are just dumped uniformly and vertically on the heads of the different members of the school community. For example, Brazilian government has recently instituted the "Dia da Família na Escola" (Family Day at the School). The script was the same for all schools and offered little opening for participants to construct their own projects.

It is possible that some teachers' reluctance to participate effectively in the proposed activities is related to some teacher education and performance policies predominating in Brazil that do not consider, in general, the importance of their participation both in devising and implementing these policies. This may be attributed to the policymakers drive to solve problems in the short run without any effective involvement in the search for long-term solutions.

It should be noted that Brazilian public policies ought to work urgently in improving teachers' general working conditions and the functional and organizational characteristics of the schools in order to reduce the obstacles observed for teachers. This would help teachers share their experiences and construct a communal knowledge base. Moreover, these conditions would enhance the potential for better developed university-school partnerships. Conceptual changes do not take place easily and in a unique pattern. They demand the establishment of a reciprocal base of trust between the different partners, in this case, schoolteachers and university researchers. The present context does not always allow researchers to do elaborate planning beforehand, further inhibiting the work and the results.

These are aspects that researchers should consider and, whenever possible, try to explain to their school partners as having a strong influence on the participants' willingness and involvement and on the possibility of carrying out longer lasting projects. This helps to avoid some aspects of the learning paradox indicated by Argyris and Schön (1996), when actions taken by school participants to promote productive organizational learning actually inhibit deeper learning, such as the presentation of defensive individual and group behavior patterns against the reforms.

The adoption of a constructive-collaborative model as an intervention strategy does more than just expose the teachers to the knowledge base of the university. It helps them to actively participate in the construction processes of this knowledge and to implement viable alternatives to overcome the problems they face, for example, strategies to strengthen school-family relations. Thus, this model may not be characterized as the usual intervention tool, but as an investigative one. It emphasizes the epistemological importance of the varied knowledge constructed by the participants.

Another advantage of this model is that it makes possible a better understanding of teachers' learning processes in their workplace, which, in turn, positively affects the basic teacher education programs of the researchers. It is then possible to understand the subtleties of teachers' professional learning processes and various aspects related to the different teaching and learning contexts that would not be otherwise evidenced. It also facilitates exploration of the process of making teacher knowledge more explicit, disseminated, criticized, codified, and developed. By investing in continued teacher education models based on the epistemology of practice, it is possible to develop better preservice teacher formation programs that consider practical classroom situations and school contexts in their multiple dimensions.

We indicate below some factors that should not be neglected when one adopts the point of view of this research and investigation methodology in order to achieve the desired goals:

- (a) The school should be considered as a locus for the professional development of teachers and for the construction of new knowledge about individual and collective processes.
- (b) The application context should include the teachers' objective working conditions as well the school's organizational conditions.
- (c) The partnership work (university-school) should originate from a real school necessity despite the fact that the first contact may come from the university.
- (d) The specific knowledge and experiences of each group of participants should be taken into account and should be shared by all.
- (e) The researchers have to be willing to consider the school's culture, adopt a flexible frame of mind, and reconstruct their projects whenever necessary.
- (f) A larger number of participants from the partner school provides better chances of success.
- (g) The school has to allocate enough time for teachers to be engaged in the work, especially for the meetings between the teachers and the researchers.
- (h) The pedagogical coordination and administration committee should not only take part in the process but lead it.

- (i) It is necessary to accommodate the school community's expectations for the research and for intervention actions.
- (j) The trust established between all parties is important and takes time to be established.

Among the relevant aspects concerning the adoption of this model is the opportunity offered to researchers to reconstruct their knowledge in a continuous and shared way and the opportunity to experience varied professional learning contexts. Finally, we suggest that the school can no longer be conceived of as merely a social agency detached from its community and other socializing agencies, such as students' families. Schools must contemplate working with different partners (including universities) in order to be successful, realizing that such partnerships do not neglect or minimize the school's function but help them respond to the demands that challenge schools today.

Nevertheless, some questions remain unanswered that demand new explorations. Some potential areas for further research include: how to guarantee accurate teachers' knowledge about their students' families (considering that this is always a partial and not a final understanding, and considering their poor beginning teacher education, their inadequate working conditions, and the singularity of school cultures); how to educate teachers to deal with diversity; how to break the resistance and bias constructed throughout different trajectories (do they belong to a given community or to a particular teacher?); how to deal with the teacher's personal right to show reluctance; how to involve the teachers that believe in a formative paradigm distinct from the proposed one; how to deal with situations of collective responsibility in which the participants assume different degrees of responsibility and involvement; and how to sensitize those in charge of conceiving and implementing the public policies that can meet the formative and professional needs of teachers and schools. All of these questions require further investigation to best prepare teachers to partner with students' families and to enhance students' learning.

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