

BELIEFS ABOUT SCHOOL: MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Knowing and analyzing teachers' beliefs contributes to understanding and improving their educational processes. Based on this assumption we propose, in this paper, to present the beliefs of leaderships and teachers about school. This analysis is based on a broader work in which beliefs regarding various aspects were analyzed, as well as teachers' knowledge and practices. This study followed an essentially qualitative methodology in nature, although it also used quantitative analysis. The instruments used to collect data were interviews with the leaders and questionnaires for teachers from 11 schools in the district of Bragança, Portugal, and integrated in the Intermunicipal Community of Terras de Trás os Montes. From the categories and subcategories used, the category School includes subcategories: school functions, school organization, relevance of school, school-family relationship and school-community relationship. The analysis of the interviews with the leaders (group directors, departmental coordinators and class directors) highlights the multiplicity of their views about the school. Emphasis is, among others, given to the school-family relationship, particularly the change in the relationship of parents to the school as the student progresses through the levels of education and, although a positive school-family relationship is identified, a distancing is also felt. The voices of the leaders also emphasize: (i) the relevance of promoting effective communication between school and family; (ii) the existence of positive expectations towards the community (in both directions); (iii) the school as a bureaucratic organization, with resonances in the daily teaching; (iv) the identification of complementary connotations of the functions of the school, on the one hand the schooling of students and, on the other, the socio-affective and evaluative dimensions of students. Regarding the beliefs of the teachers who answered the questionnaire, the focus on "training" stood out within the functions of the school, referring to it not only as "a place for exchanging knowledge", "for learning", but also for "transmitting knowledge", "values and attitudes". School is also perceived as a "place of socialization", "personal growth" and socio-affective.

Keywords: beliefs about school, functions; organization, relevance, relationships.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study is part of a broader work that is part of the Integrated and Innovative Plan to Combat School Failure (PIICIE), of the Intermunicipal Community of Terras de Trás-os-Montes (CIM-TTM) and was developed by the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (IPB), through a team of teachers/researchers of the School of Education (ESE).

Among other evidence it was intended to highlight the importance of considering the beliefs of leaders towards the school. School is a teaching institution par excellence. This process is conditioned by numerous factors, some closer to the teacher and the school, others more distant - family, community among others.

It is essential to make the distinction between belief and knowledge, since the latter is founded on objective facts, is more rational and indicates irrefutably what is true or false, requiring a long learning process to obtain this information [1]. Contrarily, beliefs are interpreted as components of subjective, incomplete and simplified knowledge of reality, which influence the teacher/person to generate facts, explanations of situations, thoughts and opinions derived from his/her own professional experience [1]. They constitute idiosyncratic truths which manifest themselves in either verbal or written statements or, still, in actions and, consequently, condition the decision-making processes [1]. Teachers hold, simultaneously, several types of beliefs [2].

2 METHODOLOGY

This section presents the research methodology, describing the methodological options and how the information was planned and collected. This study, as already mentioned, is part of a broader study, which aims to understand and analyse the beliefs of teachers and school leaders and how they can contribute to understanding and improving the educational processes. The study embraces a methodological perspective of a qualitative nature.

In this part, data were collected through *focus group* interviews with school leaders (school groups directors, curriculum department coordinators and class/group leaders) of 11 school clusters in the district of Bragança, Portugal, part of the Intermunicipal Community of Terras de Trás-os-Montes.

The instrument validation followed the procedures required in research methodologies, being validated by 6 specialist teachers and researchers in the educational area. The sample consists of over 50% of the target audience. The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed, giving rise to protocols, identified with acronyms (Director of the school cluster A01D... A11D; Coordinator of the curricular department A01CT and A11CT; Class/group director A0Dt... A11Dt). The organisation and analysis of the information from the protocols of the data collected in the *focus group* interviews were performed using the content analysis technique.

Content analysis is organised around three chronological poles: "pre-analysis, exposure of the material and treatment of the results" (p. 121) [3]. Thus, the first activity consists in floating reading, which refers to the "contact with the documents to be analysed and getting to know the text, letting oneself be invaded by impressions and orientations" (p. 122) [3], followed by the determination of the categories, based on the data referenced therein. A first coding was performed using aprioristic dimensions and categories, defining the unit of analysis as the sentence or set of sentences.

In the School category, the participants (leaders) refer to their vision of what they believe the school to be, which is defined in five subcategories of analysis - school functions; school organization; school relevance; school-family relationship and school-community relationship (Table 1).

Table 1. School category.

<i>Subcategories</i>	<i>Indicators</i>
Functions of the school	Formative function (learning/training, transmission of knowledge/development of competences) Socio-affective function Compensatory function
Organisation of the school	Institutional component (openness, ...) Bureaucratic component Relational component (interpersonal and peer relationships)
Relevance to the school	Personal/societal value Prospective value (projection of future)
School-family relationship	Typology of the relationship (collaborative, mediating, distancing, meddling, ...) Expectations Constraints
School-Community Relationships	Typology of the relationship (collaboration with partner institutions, implementation of actions, ...) Expectations Constraints

The analysis of the collected data was performed using the qualitative analysis software NVivo.

3 RESULTS

This section presents the results concerning the dimension of beliefs about the school: functions of the school; school organization; relevance of the school; school-family relationship and school-community relationship.

3.1 Functions of the school

As for the subcategory functions of the school, the participants' speeches highlight its role in the students' education, considering it as "a place for learning and knowledge" (A08D) but also "of very specific learning and development of particular competencies to be developed" (A06Dt). Its function "of training and education" (A05D) reveals that the school is an "institution par excellence" (A11D) in the construction of knowledge. It is expressively evidenced that "not everyone is taught in the same way" (A10CT) and that the school plays a fundamental role "in ensuring equity" (A05D). In addition, the speeches allude to other functions of the school, namely the social-affective and evaluative function. In this case, it is mentioned that "school is essentially about relationships (...). The school is essentially made of affections, mainly affections (A05D). In fact, the school is conditioned by an eminently socio emotional and communicative nature, which should be guided by the primacy of reciprocity and mutual respect, [4], [5], according to the principles of an ethical coexistence that allows for the expansion and insertion of students as citizens and protagonists of history and society [31].

3.2 School organization

Regarding school organization, another relevant dimension has been clarified: the school, as an institutional composite, is based on a systemic vision and is defined as an organization open to the outside world which recognizes the existence of internal and external subsystems, but which perceives them as a set of interdependent parts of a whole, in order to achieve its objectives [8]. As pointed out, "the school is not the building, it is the set of all the stakeholders and the stakeholders are many and the community in general, the educational community in general" (A04Dt). Naturally, as an open system, "the school is something that evolves and changes" (A05D).

In parallel, it is interpreted as a bureaucratic organisation, since "it has certain guidelines to follow, some standards to follow and some more targeted objectives" (A11D), "it has to respond to many things, many requests, many problems (...) of all kinds, [namely] the bureaucratic ones that our guardianship imposes on us" (A08CT). In fact, "the schools operate in a chain, not a chain of independence, but a chain of dependence" (A10CT).

In general it is also mentioned that "the problems the school has today are the problems it used to have" (A07CT). In the bureaucratic model, "the school has no autonomy (scientific, curricular, organisational, financial or administrative), because it is a service directed by the Central Services through normative orders, dispatches, circulars and direct instructions, so that its direction is outside it" (p. 32) [6]. This organisational model presents some weaknesses, present in the participants' speeches, when they refer that "one of the problems of the school is more the student's expectation and [its] anachronism" (A04D), "the rooms are the same, the chairs are the same as they were 30 years ago" (A03D). Some characteristics "of the Taylorist model still persist in schools, namely: uniformity of curriculum; rigid groupings of students; insular positioning of teachers; methodologies directed towards collective teaching; uniformity in the organisation of educational spaces; uniformity of timetables; formal discipline and unipersonal direction" (pp. 31-34) [7].

3.3 Relevance of the school

Within the scope of the relevance of school, its personal value is highlighted, since "school for me is everything" (A06D); "school is our second home" (A10Dt). In fact, the societal value is expressed as "something fundamental in our society and that it is important, in fact, to defend and develop" (A04D); being "the basis of everything, although it is not often recognized as such" (A06CT). In this regard warns that "the school is a non-negotiable good" (p.62) [8]. The understanding of the prospective value of school integrates the teachers' discourse: "school is a fundamental stage in the formation of any citizen" (A04D); it is a "structuring element in the formation of generations" (A11D). The "school is a special organisation" (p. 58) [10], whose meaning and action should be translated into the guarantee of the exercise of full citizenship.

3.4 School-family relationship

In the subcategory school-family, a diversity of beliefs was observed regarding the relationship established between these two educational contexts. The participants' discourses explained that the parents' relationship with the school changes according to the student's level of education, since "while in the pre-school, first cycle and beginning of the second cycle, the parents are very present, they are here, they give suggestions, they work, they come here, after the seventh year they start to distance

themselves a little and in secondary they distance themselves completely" (A05D). In general, the relationship between school and family is associated with a positive, collaborative relationship, containing in itself the idea of a qualified process "good relationship with the family" (A07Dt). However, there also are parents who "resign from the function of educators, completely. For example, we see that when colleagues organize the grade handover meeting 1, 2, 3 parents turn up in a class of 20 (A06CT). Its important to points out "the hard-to-reach parents" [11] whose presence teachers require, and it is usually these who do not attend. However, it is imperative to consider the strategies used in the relationship with these parents, because by determining the guidelines and the conduct of the relationship, we end up not knowing/recognizing the different relational perspectives of the parents in relation to it [4], [12], [11], [13], [14].

It should be borne in mind that, underlying the identified distancing, there may be multiple constraints, namely the mismatch between parents' working hours and school schedules, among others [17]. With regard to the expectations concerning the school-family relationship, the belief in the demand for a certain educability is evident, considered as being both adaptable and adequate to school [24], "the kids should develop social and emotional competences at home" (A06Dt) and, "no matter how restive they are, if they bring rules from home, if they are polite they comply" (A06CT); because "the better the image that the family has of the school, the better the student's success is" (A04CT). According to [15], the most conscious and most beneficial relational practices are necessarily carried out by the teacher, and the school should offer a greater variety of strategies, since the parents' different expectations with regard to the school induce different modes of relationship. It should be pointed out that the school-family relationship is a relationship between cultures and, when this relationship is close, it gives rise to situations of cultural and social continuity. When it is distant, it naturally gives rise to situations of estrangement, leading many teachers to erroneously interpret it as a lack of interest in the children's schooling process [16].

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In order for the school to complement the role of the family, the support of external technicians is provided, for the habilitation and education of students, namely the "PIICIE has helped a lot the multidisciplinary team that works with the parents at school, and the boys are under control" (A01D). In addition, it should be mentioned that "those who are not so diligent, I suppose, also do not have the family support and many times it is not their fault" (A07Dt), in fact "when the links start to unravel, then the family has no connection with the school, the school has no connection with the family, the child has no family (in inverted commas), then the school also becomes neglected" (A03D).

Teachers recognise that "as soon as there is compulsory schooling, the school must understand, let's say, this idea of values. The school is a training institution as a whole" (A06CT).

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3.5 School-community relationship

Regarding the subcategory school-community, this is understood here only in the context of the social capital of community networks [2]. The incidence of positive expectations is highlighted, recognizing that "the school has to be a completely open space, a surrounding space that can converge all the synergies, namely the local ones" (A10D) and its relevance is highlighted, since "the community is important (...) we can't work alone. There must be partnerships in everything we do" (A05D). In fact, the school not only establishes a more intense connection with the community, taking advantage of the resources that it can offer, but also constitutes itself as an important resource of the environment in which it is inserted [2], with references to a greater interaction, collaboration and cooperation with several bodies and local institutions, referring to it as being "one of the pillars of our educational project (...). We know that, as a

school, we are a fundamental element in the community. We develop a lot of work in the cultural area, among others" (A04D). In this regard, [20] recalls that the relationship with the community is a project of permanent and evolving construction. However, some considerations are made about these processes, given that some constraints are identified: "sometimes the school runs out of time to be a school and becomes the school of others, the school of projects" (A06D). The relationship with the community may not be built within the framework of a merely instrumental point of view for the school [20].

4 CONCLUSIONS

This article explains the voices of the leaders of eleven school clusters and the teachers of the CIM-TTM, in Portugal, to find out their beliefs about school. In summary, we highlight the main conclusions: (i) concerning the functions of the school, the beliefs focus on the formative, learning and compensatory function, with a belief associated with the schooling function [21] and another one more directed towards humanization, in the sense of the students' social and affective functions [8]. (ii) regarding the beliefs about the organization of the school, it is inferred that it consists of a set of interdependent parts of a whole, to achieve the objectives [22] and also the bureaucratic aspect [23] based on normative and legal documents that coerce it; (iii) in its relevance, the personal/societal and prospective value stands out; (iv) the beliefs around the family-school relationship are multifaceted their genesis and are diverse, pointing the teachers to different types of participation, namely concerning participatory or distant parents [5], [11], [13], [17], [23]. They also highlight the belief in the requirement of a certain educability as being more consonant with the school [17], inducing in the parents different ways of relating to the school [15]; (v) with regard to the school-community beliefs, the incidence of a positive nature stands out [20], since the school makes use of the resources offered by the community, as reciprocally the community does.

Awareness of the emergence of a school's own identity From this study emerges the need to reflect on the functions and purposes of the school in order to adapt them to a society in constant transformation. On the one hand, there are different beliefs characterised by a tendency towards autonomy and change; on the other hand, there is a tendency towards inertia, attributed to the measures imposed by the authority. Consequently, it is urgent that each school, in each grouping, becomes aware of the need to build a school identity. It is recommended the creation of common meanings in a school that wants to be efficient; a school with a clarifying mission of values and professional direction and a shared and inclusive vision that aims to improve the learning experiences of all students. To this end, it is necessary to interpret the determinations that guide the daily and organizational work of the school and the development of concrete strategies for mutual involvement, interaction and communication between school, family and community, essential for the mutual enhancement of these stakeholders.

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