PARENT TEACHER MEETINGS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: MANAGEMENT STYLES

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the relationship between schools and families in the context of early childhood education through the analysis of parent-teacher meetings. It draws on a case study of eleven meetings held in two public pre-schools of São Paulo city. Different meeting modes of management were analysed according to three aspects: form (meeting agenda), content (subject), and dynamics (relationship between teachers and parents). Results showed a prevalent mode of management that hinders parent participation and compromises the very goals of meetings: disorganized and rigid forms, bureaucratic content, and fragmented and centralized dynamics. But the study also found indicators that favour the construction of a more cooperative relationship during the meetings: shared management, educational content, and group dynamics. It is thus suggested that meetings be recorded and later collectively assessed in relation to the school's pedagogical project, curriculum and didactic dimensions.

STUDENT SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP – EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION – MANAGEMENT – COOPERATION

The relationships between family and school have been studied and debated in Brazil by several authors (Carvalho, 1995; Gomes, 1995; Szymansky, 1997; Haddad, 2002; Polônia & Dessen, 2005, among others). In fact, the construction of a democratic and inclusive school requires systematic thought not only on the relationship between teachers and students, but also on those between representatives of both educational institutions involved (Perrenoud, 2000; Macedo, 2005). Studies have been made on the subject concerning basic schooling (Pinto & Goldbach, 1990; Collares, 1994; Fraiman, 1998; Freller, 2000; Oliveira, 2000; Perez, 2000; Ribeiro, 2000) and early chilhood education (Haddad, 1989; Monção, 1999; Geis, 1994; Garcia, 2005; Maranhão & Sarti, 2008). The latter are particularly important as the initial years lay the grounds for all future schooling, which includes the relationship between family and school spheres.

Relationship with families has been considered within the broader debate on the curriculum for the 4-to-6-year olds (Kramer, 1993; Rossetti-Ferreira, 1998; Oliveira, 2002). Kramer (1993), for instance, stresses that good-quality 4-to-6 curriculum must aim at education for citizenship, acknowledging that co-operation with families is one of the greatest challenges for the pedagogical project. The author argues that the link between school and families must be two-way, allowing for knowledge both on the child's family, culture, and social life, and on school reality – its goals, standings, and educational priorities. Regular situations of school-family interaction are interviews, parents' visits, festivities, and parent-teacher meetings. As to the latter – the subject of this paper – the author urges careful attention to the choice of meeting subjects and psychodynamics, in order to avoid "both charging parents with complaints about children, or didatic or normative meetings wherein parents would be 'taught' on how to raise their children" (Kramer, 1993, p.102). Meetings should consist of opportunities for families to know, appraise, and ponder on what children do and learn at school, thus favouring integration, debate, and growth of all people involved.

In 1998 the Ministry for Education issued national curriculum parameters for early child education (RCNEI, *Referencial curricular nacional para a educação infantil* – Brasil, 1998), to be used as "a guide for all professionals involved with 0-to-6 year old children, so they may reflect on education goals, contents, and didatic instructions" (Brasil, 1998, p.5). In the first of its three volumes, the document offers guidelines for the partnership with families, stressing the importance of acknowledging and respecting cultural differences, of including family knowledge in the educational work, and of establishing communication channels with families. Such guidelines are based on the conviction that contact with diversity,

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besides broadening both children and educators horizon, grounds an ethical and democratic standing in human relationships. Hence the document stresses the need for preschools to allow for different means of contact with families, such as periodic meetings with parents of a group of children. In broad terms, it indicates that preschool posture must be one of openness to families: "institutions of early child education, by means of their staff, must develop the ability to listen to, observe, and learn with the families" (Brasil, 1998, p.77).

By drawing on several countries' experiences, Perrenoud (2000) makes similar suggestion; in his list of the ten essential educators' competences, one is precisely "to inform and involve parents". The core of this competence lays on the ability to analyse and distinguish differences and nuances both among parents and between their position and the teachers themselves: "parents have another standing, other concerns, a different view on schooling, different training and life experience. […] The teacher's competence consists in accepting parents *as they are*, in their diversity" (Perrenoud, 2000, p.117). Teachers hence play a central role in establishing a partnership with families – which, the author stresses, is a "permanent construction" – and occurs, among others, by means of meetings similar to the parent-teacher meetings here analysed.

In the present study, the teacher's role is analysed under the same perspective: as an active professional, committed to a complex management task (Meirieu, 2005), which includes, on the one hand, teaching contents, strategies and procedures, as well as facing occasional students' difficulties to learn; and, on the other hand, managing a broad range of human relations: among students; between students and her/himself; with the school as an institution; and with students' families, in several occasions, ranging from formal interviews to informal talks at the school gate. Among such occasions, in this study we have selected parent-teacher meetings, – a systematic interaction between the two institutions – as these are priviledged spaces for getting to know both the school's work and the families. Such choice is consistent with the RCNEI (Brasil, 1998) and the cited literature (Kramer, 1993, Perrenoud, 2000) indications. Further three reasons justify this choice: (i) they are regular activities, foreseen on the calendar of all public schools[1]; in São Paulo, official guidelines define only the number of such meetings – four per school year – there being no reference as to their content or management; (ii) since there is no formally defined pattern, each school

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[1] In private schools, parent-teacher meetings are also quite frequent, though some only arrange individual, and not group meetings with parents.

determines the meetings structure and each teacher or educator decides on how to hold them; and (iii) although they are quite often mentioned, specific literature on these meetings is still scarce (Althon, Essle, Strober, 1998; Galuzzi, 2004).

When facing the task of holding a parent-teacher meeting, the teacher somehow must answer three questions, which make up the basis of the present study: 1. What subjects must be dealt with (What should I tell parents?); 2. How must subjects be presented (How should the agenda be structured?); and 3. What strategies should be used? (How shall I relate to parents?).

This paper aims at analysing different modes of management of parent-teacher meetings by educators of São Paulo City preschools. Such modes of management are analysed according to three dimensions: form (general aspects, organization, handling of the agenda); content (subjects dealt with); and dynamics (relationships established between teacher and parents).

METHODS

Eleven meetings held by six educators[2] were observed in two public preschools (Emei, *escolas municipais de educação infantil*) in São Paulo – three educators from each preschool, in charge of classes of 4-to-6 year old children. Educators' mean age was 44 years old, varying from 36 to 49; they had a mean time of 16,5 years of experience, ranging from 8 to 25 years.

One of the preschools was located in the city central area, attending to middle and low-middle class students, and the other in the West zone, with students mainly from the lower classes. Both operated in three shifts: from 7 to 11 o'clock; from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.; and from 3 to 7 p.m.

PROCEDURES

The study was carried out along one school semester, mostly at the moment of the two scheduled parent-teacher meetings: April and June. At both preschools, the same way of defining the date was used: a different weekday for each shift, usually in the same week (for instance, the first shift on a Tuesday, the second on a Wednesday, the third on a Thursday). From each shift one educator was selected, and her two meetings were observed, thus

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[2] In both preschools, the whole teaching staff was female.

totalling 12 meetings. All teachers signed (and kept a copy) of an informed consent form for participating in the study, in accordance to ethical principles. The final empiric material consisted in the recordings of 11 meetings that were actually observed (one of the scheduled meetings was postponed and could not be included in the study).

According to the schools, the purpose of the meetings was to present to parents the pedagogical work developed with the children; each was conducted by the educator, gathering the parents of her respective class, and took place at her classroom. The meeting duration was flexible; it could last up to four hours, at the discretion of educators. During contacts previous to the observations, mentions to the need that meetings should not "take too long" were often heard, due to "the short time available" and to "parents' haste", for household or professional reasons.

Data were written down following an observation checklist divided into three parts, in order to help discriminate elements during the analysis: (1) aspects related to form (agenda): place, date, duration, number of present and absent parents, materials used; sequence of activities, who defined the agenda and how it was dealt with during the meeting; incidents, improvising; (2) aspects related to the content (subjects): meeting purpose; subjects dealt with and kind of activities proposed for their approach; relations established with preschool acivities; (3) aspects related to the meeting dynamics (relationships): who and how coordinated the meeting; educator's posture during the meeting; parents' attitudes; the dominant affective climate; occurence of critical moments.

The methodology employed a constructivist approach (García, 2002), along which to do research is to "produce observables" (Piaget, 1976) related to a subject or issue. These are elements that express evidence on what could be registered by a researcher which, on the one hand, have a perceptive basis, that is, refer to something that was seen, heard or otherwise shared in the context of an experience; on the other hand, "observables" are a researcher's reading, influenced by his or her personal experience, by the questions raised, by context factors and, above all, by the epistemologic framework adopted, which allows for interpreting or deciding on what should be recorded, in view of the research purposes. This way a "system" is built, of the elements picked up and abstracted from the data collected, "that allows for identifying, i.e., inferring a certain number of relations among that set of elements" (García, 2002, p.57). In sum, the analysis identified and abstracted elements from the empirical *corpus*, making up a thruthful representation of the studied system: the relationships established between the schools (by means of the educators) and families (through parents) during parent-teacher meetings.

RESULTS

The registers on the 11 meetings attended were analysed according to the three dimensions above mentioned: form, content, and dynamics, thus generating three sets of data, leading to categories that represent the modes of management of parent-teacher meetings. Results relative to each category are presented by descriptions followed by illustrative excerpts from the registers made, where E1 trough E6 refer to each of the observed educators. Each form description is followed by the indication, between brackets, of its incidence in the total of observed meetings. Furthermore, a table is supplied with the indicators related to the form of management as to each dimension, where those that favour a more effective and collaborative relationship between educators and parents are underlined. Such tables aim at making it easier for readers to generalise (Yin, 2005) the modes of management to everyday situations in other schools, so as to foster the debate on the relationships between schools/teachers and families, in the context of parent-teacher meetings.

Modes of management as to form

Disorganised (5/11): Within this mode of management, the different meeting parts are not duly articulated, which may reflect planning problems by the school or lack of teacher engagement in the task. Though the agenda is previously defined, activities are negatively improvised, denoting lack of adequate preparation; it generates parents' confusion and dispersion.

E4 2nd meeting with parents

Before the meeting, climate at school was of confusion and disorganisation: the decision on the room where each educator would hold her meeting was being made at the very time set for it. As no posters or cards were attached to classroom doors, parents were confused and lost, arriving late to their respective meetings. E4 looked for the book she would need for the meeting just a few minutes earlier, and could not find it in the library; she complained about the chaos: "This didn't use to be like that…" […] There were rumours that the principal would address all parents beforehand, but nobody knew for sure (eventually the principal didn't). Meetings were delayed for nearly half an hour. […] Too many informations were delivered, not fully understood. Where should the class be taken to [at their annual tour to some children's carnival]? Which would be the last term day? There were so many announcements and incomplete information that parents dispersed.

E2 2nd meeting with parents

Just like she had done at the beginning of the meeting, E2 got mixed up at the end. She got lost when a mother begged to leave earlier, disturbing the meeting sequence: the educator advanced certain activities and the other parents got dispersed, wanting to leave earlier too. E2 looked irresolute, perhaps trying to please parents, and ended up by loosing track of the meeting, though she had written down the full agenda on the blackboard, before starting the meeting.

Rígid (5/11): The meeting agenda is previously defined by the school staff (director, coordinator, and educators). The educator centralises control of the meeting rhythm, with scarce or no shifts from what was previously established, and no room for unforeseen occurrences. The main kind of activity for parents is reading texts, with verbal comments. There is some degree of parent participation and some room for their issuing opinions, but the main concern is to strictly follow the agenda.

E1 2nd meeting with parents

The educator was self-assured and showed leadership and confidence in conducting the meeting. Only four parents spoke; she made her comments after listening to them. Twice she seemed not to have well understood them, but looked rather involved in stressing her own opinion and some aspects of the subject that had been previously discussed with other educators. The agenda was closely followed; there seemed to be no room for changes.

E3 1st meeting with parents

After opening the meeting, E3 read 'sensitising' sentences to be discussed with parents. Some (long, abstract ones) seemed a little difficult. She led the discussion to the issue of setting limits to children, and gave examples of concrete cases, familiar to parents (children asking for toys, watching violent films or watching TV until late in the evening, who don't have a good performance at school). This took about 1 hour and twenty. Most of the time, it was E3 who spoke, following the agenda. Then she handed out among parents their children productions, explaining some of them (about half an hour); at last, she made general announcements (20 minutes) and closed the meeting thanking parents' presence, showing confidence and poise.

Shared (1/11): The educator follows the school-defined agenda, but does so with flexibility, autonomy, and creative improvisation, involving parents, some children who attend the meeting, and the substitute teacher, who is also present (introducing her to parents and showing them how she values her) while carrying out tasks such as handing out texts,

checking who is present, text reading, playing in small groups. Parents are encouraged to act as active collaborators, by means of effective interaction.

E6 2nd meeting with parents

The meeting structure shared dynamics was striking, when compared to the other educators' meetings. E6 showed a clear intention to include as many people as possible: her aid the substitute teacher, parents and some children who'd come along. In the beginning, she asked parents whether to start with, or leave to the end, the general matters, in which case they'd start examining the work done with children along the bimester. They all agreed to the latter. [...] Again she asked them whether they'd rather proceeed with the announcements or a workshop she had prepared, and they preferred the announcements. She briefly followed the predefined agenda (whispering to the researcher that she doesn't like spending time on that...). She asked a mother to pass around the presence list to be signed. It was noticeable that she had carefully prepared the meeting: materials to be used, texts written down on the blackboard, activities to engage parents in. She handed out invitations for the June festivities explaining she had made them the previous day: she had intended to have the children make them, but there had not been enough time. [...] A poster had been hung with photographs of the children doing classroom activities. E6 has creatively introduced several elements that were not part of the predefined meeting agenda, prepared by the school.

TABLE 1
INDICATORS OF MODES OF MANAGING THE MEETING AS TO FORM

Aspects	Disorganised	Rigid	Shared
Previous agenda	Juxtaposed parts	Followed with no flexibility	Used as reference, with flexibility
Meeting unfolding	Undefined beginning, middle, and end	Rhythm imposed by teacher	Teacher consults parents
Teacher's posture	Disorganised, inattentive	Rather inflexible, dependent	Flexible, autonomous, creative

Modes of management as to content

Bureaucratic (3/11): Predominant subjects are the institution's rules and norms, and general announcements. Relations valued are administrative and institutional, between a public equipment and its users, hence compromising the meeting purpose, of fostering the

relationships between the two educational institutions – school/teachers and family/students' parents.

E5 1st meeting with parents

Educator 5 started with two statements that, in our view, emptied the meeting's meaning: "Today we shall not address the issue of children's performance; this meeting is held to deliver general information and sign the receipt for the materials kit" [supplied by City administration]; and "the meeting will be short". Later she hastened parents out: "Parents who have already signed the list may leave" [...] She followed the agenda, summing it up, cutting out some subjects, visibly in a hurry to end the meeting.

E5 2nd meeting with parents

Subjects other than classroom issues were prevalent; pedagogic work was explicitly cast out: "This is going to be a quick meeting, just some announcements". She then told parents that she would not hand out the reports on children's performance, "only in August". She justified such postponing for reasons related to preparation of the June festivities and to clashes between the school and City administration (which didn't seem convincing, for another educator – E6 – at the same preschool dealt primarily with pedagogical issues in her second meeting).

Behavioural (5/11): The meeting contents focus on parents' behaviour in two scopes: (i) in their relation with the public preschool (not to come without shirts on, show respect for the staff, attend to school demands, come to meetings, read messages sent by the educators, check children's knapsack regularly); and (ii) in their relationship with their own children (family guidance, such as setting limits to children, or the importance of paying atention to them, showing them affection). The educator may take on one of two postures: of parents' educator, or of parents' friend. In the former case, there is a strong moralising bias, as if she knew the correct way parents should act toward children; in the latter, she tries to come closer to parents by resorting to her own experience as mother, her doubts and difficulties. Even if there is some degree of parent participation, the priority to home matters, with affective and moral content, obliterates the pedagogical dimension.

E2 1st meeting with parents

E2 seemed to see her role in regard to parents as someone who should teach them how to raise their children, based on what she had learnt, possibly believing that they lacked

training and knowledge to do it properly. She monopolised the talk for long periods. At the first activity, she asked parents to read short texts on the relationship between parents and children and spoke for 30 minutes, while parents showed little interest. Conversely, when she briefly explained children's writing evolution, parents were attentive and interested, but she didn´t take much time on the subject.

E3 2nd meeting with parents

There seemed to be certain intimacy among parents; some reported on personal or delicate situations, such as dealing with a depressive daughter, taking the kid to a psychologist, or guilty feelings for working out and spending little time with the children... E3 created an affective climate that welcomed such intimacy and mutual thrust. She talked on her working experience, and the guilt that she often felt for not being home, showing solidarity toward parents. She commented on the evils of TV watching and insisted on children's need to affection and tenderness.

Educational (3/11): Within this mode of management, there prevail subjects related to the pedagogical work. Explanations on the activities done by children and on the educator reports are detailed; in order that parents best understand them, some of the activities are done with them. It thus corresponds to the very definition of the purpose of the meeting, given by schools; the focus is on the figure of the student, rather than the son or daughter.

E6 2nd meeting with parents

The educator gave full priority to the pedagogical work done with the children, leaving aside announcements and general matters, the former taking most ot the meeting time. She explained classroom activities by giving examples with the real students, and engaged parents in some of them, so they could follow in practice what she was explaining.

E1 2nd meeting with parents

E1 payed full attention to the reports on children that she was handing out to parents: an assessment of their performance in several areas, especially in literacy, counting, and calculating. She detailedly explained each item, and went around the room clearing out doubts individually. She didn't explore collective exchanges.

TABLE 2
INDICATORS OF MODES OF MANAGEMENT AS TO CONTENT

Aspects	Bureaucratic	Behavioural	Educational
Subjects	School norms and general information	Affective and behaviour issues	Pedagogical project
Predominant relationship	Between public servants and users	Between parents and children	Between teacher and parents
Subject grounding	On official documents and government programs	On texts read for parents	On children's productions

Modes of management as to dynamics

Fragmented (2/11): There is little interaction in general. The educator tries to centralise the group's attention, but does not establish her leadership; parents are mostly passive and inattentive. Their relationship with the educator is weak, showing this with ostensible reactions (to the point that parents get up and leave without a word, while she is talking). Such dynamics is the farthest possible from one of co-operation, the prevailing attitude being one of lack of interest from both sides.

E5 2nd meeting with parents

The meeting had no distinctive trait; children were scarcely mentioned. E5 stuck to administrative matters, to complaints on the difficult relations between the school and the City administration […]. Parents came and left during the meeting, some showing scarce respect for the others or the educator.

Centralised (7/11): There is little interaction among the parents, the connection with the educator being almost exclusive. The teacher is the leader, seeming to believe her knowledge is the only legitimate one. Parents are submissive and passive; their only interventions seek some clarifying on what has been said; there is scarce suggesting or questioning. Relationship is vertical from the educator, while parents clearly take a secondary role.

E1 2nd meeting with parents

Educator greeted parents, introduced the researcher, and started an activity of reading texts on children education. She reminded parents of the previous meeting, when they talked on limits, and asked them what "listen to [the children]" meant to them. No answer. After she greatly insisted, she got six answers, which she "translated" on to the blackboard while

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commenting on them (this part took 40 minutes). Parents, though paying attention, seemed inhibited to speak. Some seemed not to have understood what had been initially read, since there were no practical examples.

Collective (2/11): The whole set of people - parents, educators – form an organic group, mutually interacting around common tasks. The group is articulated and dynamic. The educator co-ordinates the meeting whitout monopolising it: she shows she values parents' knowledge, both in discourse and in action, showing them she needs their participation. Relationships are horizontal, with effective participation and reciprocality. This can also be seen by people moving: parents do not remain seated in their chairs, but move around freely at different moments.

E6 2nd meeting with parents

E6 took into consideration parents' experience when she suggested that they play as children do in class – during which she interposed explanations on plays meaning and purpose. She also encouraged them to change physical positions, suggesting they move around, go to the blackboard, sit down individually, sit down forming small groups, leave the room to fetch something. This was effective in producing and mantaining everybody's involvement all through the meeting. […] She showed concern on involving parents with parents, while informing them on her work with the children, treating them as adults. She called them by their names (instead of the usual "mother" or "father"), establishing a horizontal relationship. She consulted them on the meeting pace, often asking for one or the whole group participation […] Parents showed respect for her and did not look intimidated or inhibited to speak. During the workshop (playing) they laughed amicably, seeming to have fun and learn at a time. The group was in high spirits.

TABLE 3
INDICATORS OF MODES OF MANAGEMENT AS TO DYNAMICS

Aspects	Fragmented	Centralised	Collective
Interaction	Little or no interaction parent-teacher	Parents interact only with teacher	Multiple interactions parent-parent and teacher-parent
Group formation	Parents gathered merely by physical presence	Parents' group controlled by teacher	Parents' group co-ordinated by teacher
Quality of relationships	Parents and teacher: indifference and boredom	Parents: dependence and passivity. Teacher: overload	Parents and teacher: participation and co-operation

DISCUSSION

The analysis of different modes of management of parent-teacher meetings held by preschool educators showed, first, that these are formally associated to the opportunity for presenting parents the pedagogical work done and establishing with parents a co-operative relationship – according to the literature and to school discourse. Results show that a few modes of management indeed did so, while most do not seem to foster close relationships with families.

Concerning meetings content, the educational mode of management (Table 2) is the one that best corresponds to the above mentioned purposes. The focus is the pedagogic relation with the children, so that parents get to know how it is carried out day-to-day. The teacher speaks of her practice, of that which defines her role. Although teacher and parents complement each other in the educational task, they stand from different points of view (Perrenoud, 2000) which must be mutually appraised, recognized, and respected.

In the mode of management of behavioural content (Table 2), the teacher distances herself from her teaching competence to share the educational function of students' "parent", which "is neither her specialty nor vocation" (Aquino, 2002). To focus a parent-teacher meeting on this may bring at least two problems. First, it is a trap for the teacher herself. It is known that educators often complain about their having to assume the roles of social worker, psychologist, physician, psychopedagogue, nanny, and others. If the institution decides to focus a parent-teacher meeting on family education, it worsens the overload that teachers complain about, and weakens the pedagogical function of early childhood education such as officially defined (Brasil, 1998). To express solidarity and sympathy to parents' challenges and difficulties in educating their children is certainly welcome, provided that this does not overlap the pedagogical contract that is central to the relation between schools (teachers) and families. A second reason for not dealing with such behavioural matters in parent-teacher meetings is that it wastes the sole occasion the school has to inform parents on the specificities of the school universe. The public school must inform parents about its service. All the more so as most of these parents did not attend preschool when young.

A note concerning the bureaucratic mode of management (Table 2): norms and announcements must not be skipped in the relation between schools and families, as, in the education-for-citizenship approach (Brasil, 1998; Kramer, 1993) this political and institutional dimension must be included: information on norms and rules, knowledge of, and participation in, school functioning. But such information should not occupy the precious time of meetings devised for the pedagogical project, as it does in the bureaucratic mode, when most

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of the time is used with subjects linked to social programmes (handing out of free materials, clothing, milk, transportation) and to the general functioning of schools (norms, preparation of festivities and tours etc.). This paper suggests that specific occasions be created tor releasing such information – or, when not possible, that they take a minimum of time in parent-teacher meetings.

Differences found in modes of management concerning the form lead to some key issues worth discussing, on the agenda design and handling. The agenda should not be seen as a mere list of subjects to be dealt with; rather, it should define the sequence of subjects, the estimate time to be spent on each, the way activities should be carried out. In two of the analysed modes of management – disorganised and rigid forms (Table 1) – little attention was paid to these. In the former, there is some confusion – perhaps due to inadequate preparing – that leads to lack of interest both by teacher and parents; in the latter, the agenda is followed so strictly that it hinders parents' expression and teacher's autonomy. In both, parents are passive before the representative of the institution, which is not consistent with a comprehensive, participative, and democratic relationship (Brasil, 1998; Macedo, 2005). Certainly, the school is responsible for the organisation of parent-teacher meetings. The agenda should take into consideration parents' features, so as not to widen social and cultural differences between parents and teacher, which may inhibit the former. For instance, reading and debating texts – which was used in 9 out of 11 observed meetings – may hinder, instead of foster, participation, as Pinto & Goldbach warn (1990, p.113): "talking to a great public is a habit of school professionals, not of a lay group. One needs some disinhibition and verbal fluency".

In the shared form mode of management (Table 1), unlike the previous ones, the educator assumes a freer and more creative attitude toward the agenda, consulting parents as to the sequence of subjects. Here the agenda serves the teacher and takes into consideration parents' views, who can then share its development. It is a flexible reference, accepting changes according to particular situations. One example is the choice of practical activities (playing) rather than reading and debating texts – which leads us to the third analysed aspect.

Concerning the meeting dynamics, the kind of relationship that is established among all is central, and linked to the two aspects above mentioned. In the collective dynamics mode of management, there is effective parent participation in interactive and playful situations that exemplify the activities developed with and by the children. Besides parent involvement and closeness to the teacher, this favours parent understanding of classroom activities and

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contents. Relationships between parents and with the substitute educator were also encouraged. The meeting results then not only from the educator conduction, but from parents' engagement and another professional's: it is a collectively constructed process.

The other two modes of management as to dynamics do not contribute to parents interaction, engagement or paticipation. In the fragmentd dynamics not even a group is formed: people are gathered apparently bound by obligation and there is no interaction. The centralised dynamics reflects the traditional school model, where the intense teacher activity contrasts with students (parents) passivity. Attention and interaction are focused on the teacher, who controls the meeting pace, subjects, and expressions. Without denying the teacher role as leader, it is worth warning against modes of management where excessive control by the teacher hinders the construction of reciprocal relations.

Finally, this study has allowed for clearly identifying, in each dimension of the modes of management here analysed, indicators that favour parents' participation in the meetings, while the teacher may show more freedom and autonomy. These correspond to the educational content, shared form, and collective dynamics modes of management. Since these are far less frequent than the other modes among the analysed meetings, it follows that they should be disseminated – along with other successful meetings. In order to do so, meetings shoud be recorded and their modes of management analysed by the whole teaching staff, in periodic gatherings at moments assured wthin the regular school planning. This is all the more important because, as Garcia (2005) warns, the subject of family-school relationships (and even less parent-teacher meetings) is practically absent both from schools' pedagogical projects and from teacher education. The collective debate on meetings may elicit each school' responsibility – and that of the teacher, the real manager of such meetings – and stregthen them, so the meetings become constructive and mutually enriching events.

FINAL REMARKS

Two challenges face both those willing to study parent-teacher meetings and those in charge of organising them. First, they must be seen as an issue of management by the teacher, with the indispensable institution support. Second, the task of organising them must constantly co-ordinate content, form, and dynamics. The meeting content must be integrated to the pedagogical project and related to day-to-day classroom and school activities. Its form must be close to the didatic scope, defining resources and strategies to approach the

contents. And the whole must be immersed in a relational dimension, lively, flexible and open to welcome parents' engagement.

This paper discussed elements present in different modes of management of parent-teacher meetings, leading to the conclusion that such modes may impair or foster a co-operative relationship between schools and families. As in any constructive process, it is important to distinguish what must be kept and what must be changed – and this paper supplied indicators that favour good quality in such relationship. In this analysis of modes of management the underlying purpose was to contribute to teachers' daily practice – teachers engaged in constructing and consolidating an effective partnership between schools and families.

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