Adolescence and life settings: not missing the forest for the trees

Personal and social development implies interpersonal relationships, daily security (at home, at school, in the street), and an absence of urgent needs of a purely “survival” nature. As the well-known psychologist Maslow observed, it is hard to think about one’s health and future when one’s survival is at risk today. It is hard to think about one’s personal achievements when one is plagued by hunger, fever, pain, or fear.

The *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychology* dedicates its second special issue to the *Adolescence Life Settings*, gathering the work of a number of researchers, both Portuguese and foreign, in this area.

Parental involvement in schooling is essential – optimizing the well-being and school success of the adolescent child. However, it has only recently been emphasized that this involvement is in turn influenced by several factors, including: emotional literacy, the capacity for self-regulation, resiliency, and individual vulnerability, which varies from child to child. These factors can either alleviate or aggravate the impact of school, social, and family circumstances.

Parents who are more involved in school develop attitudes that are more positive regarding the school and their children’s teachers; more positive toward themselves; and have greater expectations about the future of their children. What draws some parents into the school – and repels others – is the environment of the school itself or the community it is in. Parental interaction with the school reflects a personal investment that is at once cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, and is intertwined with the school’s organization and the characteristics of the community. This has rarely been emphasized.

In schools that are considered to show a positive environment, parents mention fewer barriers to their involvement, their participation is more effective, they describe joint parent-teacher actions that address active communication, problem resolution, mutual support, and a fair dialogue about the functions of both parent(s) and teacher(s).

Regarding the environment of the surrounding neighborhood, those schools that establish collaborative links to community resources empower parents in
the education of their children, and are better positioned to face the challenges that confront families and students, in particular.

Aside from promoting quality among the various sub-systems (family, school, friends, and community), strategies are required that recognize and cultivate links among these same sub-systems, building a network of local and social support that nurtures the sense of belonging, mutual respect, and reciprocity between the significant figures in these settings. There is also a need to embrace adolescents coming from low-income backgrounds, those who are physically challenged, chronically ill, or who have other special education needs, and those whose families are isolated, are under stress, are under-educated, or at risk of social exclusion.

There is a vicious circle at work that needs to be broken. It is entirely possible that the most functional parents may make a greater effort to become involved in the school, and because of this, their very involvement may reveal that we are dealing with healthier families. Moreover, perhaps parents tend to become more involved in those schools that are already of higher quality, and the schools that appreciate parental involvement are the very same schools that are more able to provide a good environment for students. At the same time, the parents of adolescents without problems “fear” less and seek more contact with the school and their children’s teachers.

Clearly there is a need to study these factors simultaneously, in such a way as to clarify their interaction and the contribution(s) of each in the adolescent’s personal, social, and school adjustment – especially when dealing with children coming from vulnerable families.

We should bear in mind that the decreasing mortality rate witnessed at the end of the 1960s reflects a reduction of infectious disease, while chronic diseases (heart and cancer) and behavioral pathologies (substance abuse, smoking, violence, suicide, depression, anxiety, child abuse) showed an increase.

“Education for all” has long been considered to be a powerful vehicle for progress, for health, and for equal opportunity. The school can offer well-being, social support, and a sense of personal worth, but it is also a scene of interpersonal violence, personal isolation, and perceptions of weakness, injustice, and hopelessness. While community elements can inspire a sense of belonging and local pride, they can also be the source of rejection, bullying, and discrimination. At school and in the community, it is impossible to over-emphasize the importance of social engagement, cohesion, social networks, community involvement, social capital, and trust relationships.
With greater or lesser optimism, schools are favored settings for implementing participative programs targeting young children and adolescents. Ideally, such programs will foster the students’ success, their health, and their overall well-being, and in addition to the students’ participation, they should draw in the most important actors in the students’ lives – their friends, families, teachers, and neighbors in the surrounding community.

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