

The participation of mothers who are deaf in the school life of their hearing children*¹

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Abstract

The challenge of understanding the social and academic needs of deaf children in the educational context has been the subject of deep analysis in the literature, but the same does not happen in relation to deaf mothers and the performance of their role as responsible for the education of their children. Often, mothers who are deaf face communicational and attitudinal barriers, requiring adjustments in the family-school relationship, in order to guarantee them the fundamental right to participate in school decisions and in the school life of their students. This study aimed to explore the perspective of mothers who are deaf on their involvement in the school life of their hearing children, in order to identify areas of political action and practices for mobilizing facilitators of family-school relationships. For this, a focus group was held with 10 mothers who are deaf, whose children attended basic education – 1st and 2nd cycles – in Portuguese public schools. The results suggest that, despite the mothers' willingness and commitment to get involved in their children's school life, this participation is restricted by the way in which communication and the family-school relationship is traditionally structured. The perceived barriers are associated with the avoidance of situations of interaction with the school, in addition to the concern for the lack of knowledge of their children's school life. The widespread existence of interpreters in schools or the training of the school community for the use of sign language

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are some of the changes discussed by mothers who are deaf in achieving their right to participate in the school life of their children.

Palavras-chave

Mothers who are deaf – Family-school relationship – Participation.

Introduction

Myron Uhlberg is an acclaimed children's book writer, the son of two deaf people, to whom he dedicated a memoir (*Hands of my father*, 2008). In that book, he recounts an episode that occurred when he was 9 years old, and his parents were invited for the first time to attend a parents' meeting at his school. In the hilarious pages dedicated to this event, he described his anxiety about having to participate in the meeting, interpreting for his parents, and in front of the parents of all his classmates, all the information transmitted by the teacher, as well as his parent's comments. It is not the aim here to explore the educational success of young Myron but to understand that the situation experienced by his parents in the 1940s of the last century seems to persist in the second decade of this millennium, illustrating the obstacles that deaf mothers still encounter in participating in the education of their children.

The importance of parents' participation in education

Most children assume two roles in their life until adulthood: that of someone's son/daughter, and that of a student in a school. However, parents are the first educators of their children and, in this sense, are responsible for their initial development (BERGER; RIOJAS-CORTEZ, 2014). Although it is in the context of the family that children make their first socialization, from which future interactions develop, this is not enough, and the school, as a second space of socialization, plays a fundamental role.

The family is responsible for actively engaging in the school life of its children, accompanying them in their schooling path, in close cooperation with the school and teachers (SOUSA; PEREIRA, 2014). In Portugal, the participation of families was legitimized by the publication of the first *Law of Parent Associations* (*Law No. 77/77*, of February 1), becoming recognized as an active intervening party with the *Decree-Law N.º 376/80* of September 12 (SOUSA; PEREIRA, 2014; MARTINS; SARMENTO, 2012). However, in Portugal as in many other countries, the implementation of this relationship has been troubled and imperfect (SOUSA; PEREIRA, 2014; MARTINS; SARMENTO, 2012). Sousa and Sarmento (2011) state that the relationship was established, in fact, in a negative record, where families were only called to school when there were problems with their children or for events in which they assumed the role of spectators.

The existence of a strong and positive correlation between the quality of the school-family relationship and school results is an accepted and almost irrefutable fact. Nonetheless, the low participation of families in the school life of their students and the respective negative correlation with school performance, behavior, and attendance are problems that schools, and teachers continue to face (SOUSA; PEREIRA, 2014).

The advantages of parents' participation and involvement in their children's school life have been known for several decades. Comer (1986) considered that the need to increase proximity to families was due to the growing distance between schools, their teachers, and the environment that involves schools. Indeed, he stated that, with increasing numbers of teachers residing outside the areas covered by schools, with both parents exercising professional activities, the closeness that previously existed between teachers, students, and their families, often materialized outside the walls of schools, was disappearing and, therefore, an intentional action by schools to reduce the distance between themselves and families became required.

Currently, schools are hardly in the situation referred to by Comer, in 1986, according to which many did not recognize the value or importance of the participation of parents and many parents were not comfortable participating in the activities promoted by the schools. Nevertheless, there are still reasons that explain families' low involvement. Among the various constraints to the effective participation of families in school, parents' lack of time for work reasons is the most evoked factor for the lower commitment to the school life of their children. From the side of the schools, the reasons are mainly attributed to the

[...] persistence of the heavy and bureaucratic structural and functional grammar of the school, the tradition of turned backs and mutual blaming between school and family, the insular behavior of the school towards the community, or the lack of preparation/training of teachers to relate to families. (SOUSA; PEREIRA, 2014, p. 325)³.

In addition to this situation, although schools often point out as a desirable objective to increase the participation of parents in school life, in reality they do not know very well how to achieve this goal. Studies such as those by Park and Holloway (2017) can make an interesting contribution to this analysis. Through a longitudinal study, these authors verified the differential impact of three types of parental involvement on the academic performance of their children. These three types of parental involvement identified in the study were: "Good Private-Involvement"; "Good Public-Involvement"; and "Parent Networks". Good Private-Involvement refers to circumstances where interaction between parents and the school seeks to improve their child's situation, while Good Public-Involvement refers to actions where the goal is to improve the situation of all children in the classroom or school (the authors give the example of fundraising or organizing events). The third type, Parent Networks, refers to informal involvement with other parents, not initiated or supervised by the school. Data collected nationwide in the United States of

3- This citation is originally in Portuguese and so, this is a free translation to English. This will be the case for all the Portuguese citations referenced in this article.

America (USA) from 17,385 students who were followed from the last year of preschool to the 5th year, showed that Good Involvement-Private was positively related to children's performance in reading and mathematics, especially in families with higher socioeconomic status. In turn, Good Public Involvement was not related to individual income, but a good average level of Public Involvement of the parents of a school was associated with higher levels of school performance results. The size of parent networks was also considered a good predictor of school performance. The authors conclude by recommending schools to promote policies that enhance involvement in school life, especially those that seek to foster the involvement of families of lower socioeconomic levels.

Educators and teachers, especially when working with children from families with some linguistic and/or cultural diversity, are, according to Berger and Riojas-Cortez (2014), better able to teach children when they have some knowledge about their families, namely their cultural characteristics, their educational practices, and their traditions. Through the qualitative analysis of four school districts in the USA, López et al. (2001) verified that schools that were successful in involving migrant parents – those who usually presented greater difficulties in participating in school life and contributing to academic success –, sought to respond, first and foremost, to the needs of parents, considering themselves responsible for meeting the multiple needs of migrant parents daily.

Other studies (SILVA, 2003) allow us to suggest that the distance between the school and the family stems mainly from discrimination carried out by the school that, when assuming a certain cultural pattern, puts some students and families at a greater or lesser disadvantage about the requirements it imposes. Therefore, based on the recognition of the advantages of parents' involvement in school and close school-family collaboration, Stein (2018) sought to understand the perspectives of black North American families on practices that promote this interaction, giving voice to these mothers. Hence, a similar movement is needed to study the interactions between schools and families with deaf members.

The involvement and participation of deaf parents in the school life of their students

Deafness is now understood as a difference in human experience – distanced from traditional conceptions of disability – characterized by the impossibility of using hearing to process information and constituting the basis of an identity group defined by the use of a visual-motor linguistic system – the sign language (SILVA; CÓRDULA, 2017). Despite constituting a difference limited, in ontological terms, to a sensory modality, the deaf community still faces obstacles of a linguistic and attitudinal nature to its participation in the different domains of life (SINGLETON; TITTLE, 2000).

The deaf community is a cultural group that must be included in the set of cultures we encounter in our institutions (SINGLETON; TITTLE, 2001). However, that is not the case. In the case of relationships between deaf families and their hearing children, there is very little research and literature on best practices to provide services to this population.

Most research on hearing children of deaf parents focuses on hearing children, their development, characteristics, and problems (KLIMENTOVÁ *et al.*, 2020; ST-ONGE *et al.*, 2009; RUSCHIN, 2004; ZAREM, 2003; ZABORKIAK-SOBCZAK, 2020), neglecting the analysis of other problems, such as the relationships between families and schools. Empirical research results challenge the common assumption that deaf parents have fewer skills, although, effectively, hearing loss can restrict the acquisition of dominant cultural principles due to the communication barriers that deaf parents encountered during their development, lack of incidental learning, and inadequate models of parenting skills (FOX, 2018).

Fox (2018) refers to the existence of situations of role reversal and assumption of protective and support functions by hearing children of their deaf parents. Recognizing that the linguistic and cognitive development of hearing children of deaf parents can be considered to be at risk, close collaboration between parents and the school is particularly relevant. However, most hearing children of deaf parents state that their parents rarely went to school to talk to teachers or other professionals, mainly due to communication barriers, being this role assumed by other members of the extended family. Likewise, Mallory *et al.* (2019) found that deaf parents of hearing children tend to turn to friends and acquaintances, more than professionals, to help them with issues related to the education of their children, recognizing the need for more support (parent support groups, or counseling services) based on the use sign language.

Based on data collected in the USA, Olkin *et al.* (2006) compare families of adolescents with parents with disabilities and families of adolescents with parents without disabilities. In general, they found few significant differences, which occurred on issues related to employment and income. Although the inclusion of parents with deafness in the sample may be contrary to the perspective of deafness that we advocate for, this study allowed us to identify some specificities in families in which the parents were deaf. In these cases, more difficulties in communication outside the family were reported, religious spaces were attended less frequently, and difficulties in communication with the schools of their children were reported, restricting their activities exclusively to their family. These data led the authors to recommend more support for deaf parents, including the existence of interpreters in community services, schools, and events.

Klimentová *et al.* (2017) analyzed data collected through 14 interviews with hearing children of deaf parents (between 18 and 41 years of age), reflecting on their experiences as children. They identified five topics that appeared in all interviews: i) interpretation for parents in situations for which children were too young or did not have the required experience; ii) lack of support for the child in the position of mediator between deaf parents and the hearing world; iii) lack of a sense of security and support from parents; iv) feelings of loss of a piece of childhood – premature maturation; v) a childhood spent in a cohesive community of deaf people.

Hadjikakou *et al.* (2009), analyzed the school experiences reported in the interviews they conducted with 10 hearing adults that were children of deaf parents. Regarding communication with the school, they found that most deaf parents either never went to

school or went very rarely to talk to teachers, mainly due to communication barriers. When deaf parents visited the school, it was often the hearing child who performed the functions of interpreter, leading the child to take advantage of this position in some situations. Regarding homework, almost all interviewees stated that they did not have parental support in these tasks. In what concerns the teachers, the interviewees pointed to the understanding that they demonstrated for their situation, being children of deaf parents, with some showing curiosity or admiration for their efforts, allowing some of the interviewees to have special treatment.

In their research on a specific school, Bezerra and Mateus (2017) verified a disinterest on the part of the institution in creating strategies/mechanisms so that the parents could be part of the school community, from the perspective of a multicultural education, open to diversity, which eventually led to the non-participation of the children in pedagogical activities. These authors also reaffirm the importance of the school institution not neglecting the necessary support to the families of its students, recognizing and respecting interindividual differences.

Participation in the educational context of their children is one of the areas where the obstacles experienced by deaf parents can be assumed, since there are no mechanisms to guarantee the support of a translator or sign language interpreter in parent-school communication (BEZERRA; MATEUS, 2017). These restrictions experienced by deaf parents have remained silent, both in the political and practical field (since the scope of the intervention of interpreters in the school context is only regulated in the framework of bilingual education directed to deaf students) and in investigative terms, in which their analysis has been limited to the phenomenon of intermediation of languages and cultures carried out by their children (e.g., MOROE; ANDRADE, 2018).

Given the fundamental values aimed at the right of involvement and participation in the school life of their children, this study aims to describe the involvement of deaf mothers in the school life of their hearing children, exploring how the interaction between the condition of deafness and the environmental characteristics of schools interferes in the exercise of the right and duty to participate in the governance of the school and decision-making regarding their children. Thus, it seeks to identify lines of political action and practices necessary to promote the relationship between the school and these parents.

Method

Bearing in mind the eminently exploratory nature of this study, the focus group method was implemented to obtain in-depth information about the perspectives and experiences of deaf mothers regarding their involvement and participation in the school life of their children. The focus groups are defined as an appropriate strategy for qualitative data collection within the scope of participatory research (BAGNOLI; CLARK, 2010) and/or when the intention is to describe a phenomenon in depth (BARBOUR, 1999). As described by Krueger and Casey (2014) the focus group interview consists of “a carefully planned discussion to gain insights into a focus area in a permissive and non-threatening environment” (p. 2).

Participants

For the recruitment of participants, a convenience sampling process was adopted, identifying families in which both parents (mother and father) were deaf and parents of hearing children at school age. Participants were selected according to their communicative skills (i.e., fluent in Portuguese Sign Language (LGP)) and willingness to share their experiences related to deafness and its implications on the relationship with the school of their students. The recruitment also sought, in an intentional way, the participation of parents from different geographical regions of Portugal.

The invitation to participate in the study was recorded and sent, via e-mail, in video format, containing a presentation of the study in LGP - explaining objectives, method, and expected social impact - accompanied by an informed consent form also translated into LGP.

Ten mothers, whose children attended basic education - 1st and 2nd cycles - from Portuguese public schools and were aged between 7 and 12 years agreed to participate in the study. The mothers were between 41 and 46 years old and had degrees of deafness ranging from severe (n=3) to profound (n=7). All of them used LGP as their first language.

The participants were geographically distributed by different regions of Portugal, specifically: northern area (n=3), Metropolitan Area of Lisbon (n=3), central area (n=2), Algarve (n=1), and Autonomous Region of Madeira (n=1). In terms of education, six were Bachelor graduates and the remaining four had completed secondary education (in Portugal, secondary education is equivalent to secondary education in Brazil, that is, three years of studies, from the 10th to the 12th grade). Only one mother was unemployed, and the others worked in various professional fields, namely: four were LGP teachers, two worked in food retail, and the others worked as administrative assistants, textile workers, and decorators.

Eight of them were married or were in a *de facto* union (civil partnership) and the rest were single or divorced. The household consisted of one (n=3) to two children (n=7). Communication with the hearing children was carried out, in most cases (n=8), using LGP and the Portuguese language (in written and spoken modality), and in two cases only through LGP. All participants were mothers responsible for their children's upbringing. The sample consisted only of mothers (without the participation of fathers) since they were - within the parental figures - those who showed their availability to participate.

Data collection

As a method of data collection, a focus group was conducted with the participating mothers. As summarized by Adler *et al.* (2019), the focus group interview allows participants to tell their experiences, opinions, and expectations about the future without a rigid sequence of questions. Despite the flexibility that characterizes this method, conducting a focus group requires careful planning, which includes preparing an interview script. For this purpose, a script was developed for the focus group, with discussion topics organized around three main thematic axes: (i) the role and participation of parents in the school life of their children (for example, the meaning and importance of parental

participation); (ii) experiences in the relationship with the school (e.g., strategies and routines adopted for communication and relationship with the school community; main barriers and impediments; examples of good and bad experiences); and (iii) the changes necessary to support the participation of deaf mothers in the school life of their children (e.g., at the political level, the direction of schools and teachers). Within each topic, open questions were asked – in a semi-structured way – about the participants' experiences and opinions to facilitate the discussion. The construction of the script considered previous studies' results related to the participation of parents in the school life of their children (LEVINTHAL; KUUSISTO; TIRRI, 2021; LARA; SARACOSTTI, 2019).

Before the beginning of the focus group, a brief questionnaire was applied to collect demographic data that served as a basis for the characterization of the participants. This self-report, anonymous questionnaire focused on variables such as age, educational qualifications, place of residence, degree of deafness, profession, command of sign language, and schooling year of their children. With digital access (using google forms), the questionnaire had the translation of each question to LGP. This questionnaire also included a section where the request for informed consent and authorization to record the session was renewed.

A single focus group session was conducted with the participation of the 10 mothers and with the moderation of a researcher fluent in LGP (the first author). The date of the discussion session was defined with the presentation of different options to the participants, which – at their convenience – was held on a weekday after work. The session took place through the *Zoom* platform and lasted 2 hours and 30 minutes. It began with a welcoming note to the participants, repeating and summarizing the objective of the focus group. At that time, expectations were also established regarding the participation of each of the participants, namely the existence of an initial space for the presentation of each one and the need for alternated communication (which would facilitate the translation and transcription process). In line with the guidelines regarding the role of a moderator in a focus group context (ADLER; SALANTERA; ZUMSTEIN-SHAHA, 2019), during the session the script questions were posed in a flexible manner responding to the flow of discussion. At the end of the session, mothers were asked to summarize the essential points of their experiences and opinions about involvement in their children's school life. The session was recorded in multimedia format for later transcription of the participants' responses.

Data analysis

The recording of the focus group was subject to transcription and translation into Portuguese by two LGP translators and interpreters. The translations were then compared, and disagreements or discrepancies were resolved by consensus.

The transcription was then subjected to a thematic analysis conducted by two of the authors of the study. The two researchers independently conducted the analysis, with the full reading of the text and with the identification of units of meaning – defined at the level of the sentence segment – and of categories and subcategories that brought together

the main ideas of the mothers' discourse. In *debriefing* sessions, researchers shared and discussed their coding scheme, and by consensus, the categories were revised and refined to achieve a common (consensual) coding scheme. *Table 1* shows an example of the categorization scheme that was inductively generated from the participants' speech.

Table 1 - Example of part of the categorization scheme

TOPIC	CATEGORY	UNITS OF MEANING WITH INTERVIEWEE IDENTIFICATION
Forms of participation	Child Support	"When she's doing her homework, I ask her if she wants me to be there, she tells me yes and then I help her, I'm there." (P7)
	Attending Formal Meetings	"Participate when parents are called to school for meetings." (P7)
	Attending school activities/festive events	"I've participated in parties like Christmas, in which the director invites everyone to go, and I've also participated in the final party where I had some snacks there, just that." (P9) "I go to parties and what I do is I take my father, my sister, we all go, and we can socialize with each other, I've never gone on my own." (P6)
Participation experience	The need to advocate for the right to participate	"Because everyone is talking and I'm sitting there looking, and asking to give me the information" (P2) "Because I wanted to know all the information, I want to capture everything like the hearing parents, because they have information that I have to discover." (P9)
	Sense of Restriction in Participation	"Hearing mothers participate at 100%, they participate in interactions, in conversations, and various things, but deaf parents how do they do that? (...) I rarely participate and in very little, the majority of the participation is of the hearing parents." (P7) "It's a bit annoying because I'm the only one who's deaf and there's a lot of barriers and I can't get away from it. Do you see?" (P2)

Source: Research data.

Based on this common coding scheme, the remaining body of text was analyzed, with the implementation of three rounds of evaluation of the degree of consensus between the two researchers. From the comparative analysis of the categories identified by the researchers, we obtained degrees of agreement that varied between 87% and 95%. In these rounds of discussion, all categories added or modified were discussed until a consensus was reached.

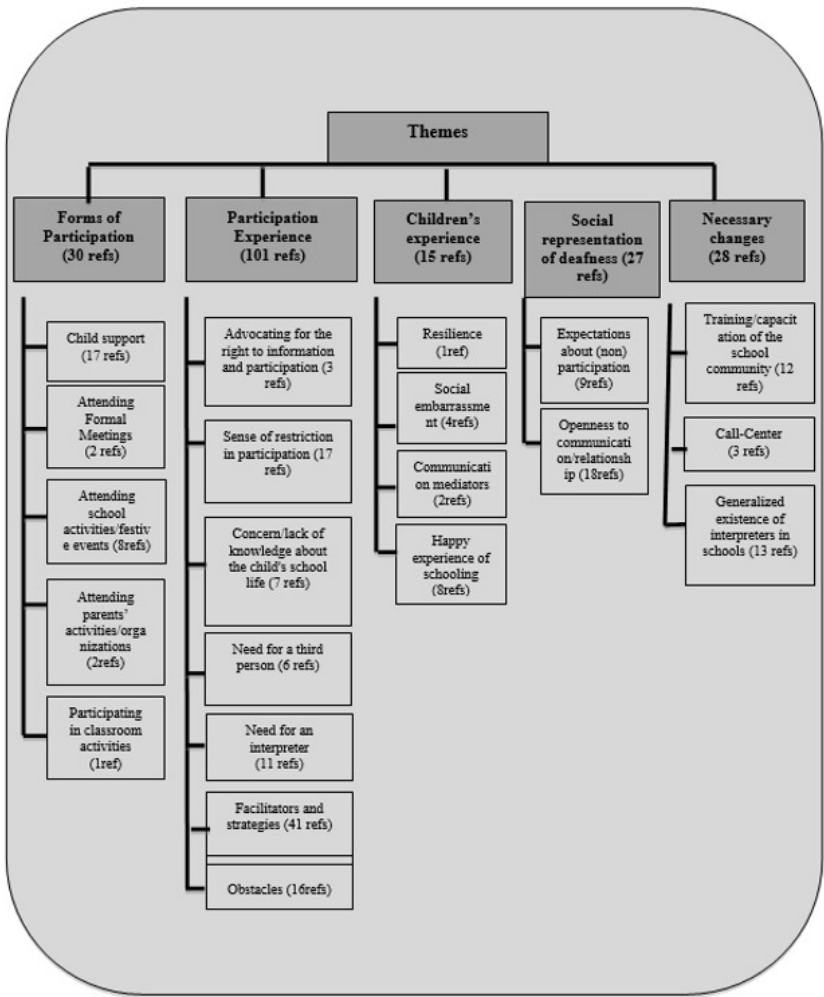
Ethical considerations

This study was developed considering the ethical guidelines for educational research published by the Ethics Committee of the Centre for Research and Innovation in Education which follow the Helsinki Convention and the Oviedo Convention (inED, 2021), having obtained the informed consent of each participant and guaranteed conditions of anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected. Linguistic accessibility needs were also met in all phases of the study, including the dissemination of results, with *debriefing* sessions promoted between the first author of the study – fluent in LGP – and the participants. The protocol for data collection and analysis was approved by the Ethics Committee of inED of Escola Superior de Educação do Porto.

Results

Through content analysis, a total of 201 units of meaning, distributed around five central themes were identified: (i) forms of participation, (ii) experience of participation, (iii) children’s experience/role, (iv) social representation of deafness and (v) necessary changes. Figure 1 shows the categorization scheme resulting from the content analysis, with the categories and subcategories identified in each theme.

Figure 1 - Categorization scheme



Source: Research data.

Theme: Forms of participation

In the first theme, “forms of participation”, the modes of involvement in the school life of their children were categorized, including direct study support, as well as participation in formal and non-formal school activities.

In this theme, as can be confirmed in the categorization scheme, the content analysis showed five categories that reflect the presence of parents in the school life of the children, from “support to the child, attending meetings, attending activities and festive events, attending parents’ activities/organizations and participating in classroom activities”.

In the “child support” category, mothers emphasized their commitment to accompany their children’s learning activities at home (“support the study” category). In this sense, the mothers mentioned that it is essential to support their children “in learning some subjects” (P5), “in schoolwork” (P7), and “homework” (P9).

In addition, they mentioned their actions to “value/encourage study”, reinforcing the importance of school success and the positive consequences that it entails for the lives of their children. Thus, mothers showed their concern to transmit to their children the value of study as a basis for acquiring knowledge about the world and for an autonomous and active life in society. In particular, the mothers referred to the need to “encourage, provide several things for the future: autonomy, general things, education, interaction, learning” (P2) and recognized that “it is important for them to learn and know the world, politics, culture, language” (P3), given that “learning new things is positive” (P10).

The support to the child provided by the deaf mothers also included informal conversations about the routine at school – “talking about school”, “if they have homework” (P5), “I ask how the day was, if there were any problems, some punishment, several things” (P4).

Another description of “forms of participation” was involvement in “formal meetings and school activities/events”, in which the involvement is evoked or initiated by the school: “when parents are called to school for meetings” (P7), “when they set up a meeting and I say I want to participate.” (P6), “I participate in the school end of the year parties” (P1), “I go to the Christmas party and to the one at the end of the school year” (P3). The interaction of deaf mothers with the parents of other children was also described as a form of participation – “participating in parents’ activities/organizations” specifically through networks such as the “parents’ association” (P1) and the “mothers’ *WhatsApp* group” (P9). It should also be noted that one of the mothers shared another form of participation – intrinsically reported as a positive experience – where her involvement with the school went through “participating in classroom activities”, “I was teaching LGP [in preschool], they had a lot of interest and some children at the end asked how the gestures were, they were very interested. This was positive” (P9).

Theme: Participation experience

The second theme, “participation experience”, was the most prevalent in the discourse of deaf mothers and was also the theme in which more categories were identified: “advocating for the right to information and participation; a sense of restriction in participation; concern/lack of knowledge about the child’s school life; need for a third person; need for an interpreter; facilitators and strategies; and obstacles”.

One idea that stood out was the reference of mothers to the participation in the school life of their children as a right they had not yet achieved. The “need to advocate for the right to participation/access to information, for purposes of equality” with the

other parents seems to be part of the daily experience of these mothers: “I say I want to participate” (P6), “because they are all talking and I’m sitting there looking, and asking to give me the information (P2), “I want to capture everything like the hearing parents, because they have information that I have to discover” (P9).

The “sense of restriction in participation”, reflecting the difficulties felt, was consensual among mothers, noting that, several times, they feel left out and that their deafness is an obstacle to their participation. Their narratives pointed to an experience of inequality that leads them to “withdraw” or “feel impotent” regarding the process of participation in school: “Hearing mothers participate at 100%, they participate in interactions, conversations, and various things, but deaf parents how do they do that?” (P7), “I don’t feel like going because there are barriers, because everyone is talking and I’m sitting there looking” (P2).

The barriers were described mainly in communicational terms. They report that they cannot “communicate with teachers” (P8) or feel constraints to communication, “I feel barriers, you can’t talk to everyone at ease out of shame.” (P9) and, therefore, do not correspond to the participation requested of them by school actors, “they ask me to participate more, but I cannot” (P3).

These restrictions in participation generate in mothers the “concern or a sense of lack of knowledge about the child’s school life”: “I am afraid for her safety, I send her texts” (P7), “as a mother I am worried if my child is having a good development” (P1), “It is annoying because they send me a paper saying that my son does not participate, I try to know more, but he doesn’t inform me, I feel that there is a barrier.” (P2), “It has already happened, and it had to be my daughter to let me know. Of course, we as parents are distressed because it is my daughter who gives us this information, explains to us who pushed her, how it happened” (P9).

Faced with these difficulties, the “need for a third person” to mediate the mother’s relationship with the school and with the teachers, in particular, is very present in the experience of the interviewees “My sister accompanies me and interprets what is happening because I cannot participate” (P8).

In this context, the “need for an interpreter” is unanimously referred to as an indispensable resource to ensure their participation in meetings: “I do not want to participate in the class meeting or, otherwise, I ask for an interpreter”, (P4), “but I feel bad, I would rather have an interpreter there.” (P10).

It is interesting to note that, within this theme, despite the difficulties and obstacles experienced, much of the interviewees’ discourse focused on the “facilitators and strategies” used. In this regard, the mothers highlight the “use of written messages (notebook, email, WhatsApp, SMS), face-to-face contact (use of orality/lip reading, use of gestures), and the use of video calls”. Regarding the “use of orality/lip reading, use of gestures”, the mothers report that being in person, with the school actors, makes understanding the messages simpler: “I prefer to call and schedule an individual meeting” (P4), “I prefer to have an individual meeting, I feel good, I understand well” (P8). The “use of video calls” is also mentioned as a way to facilitate the participation of mothers through “Zoom” (P6) or “video call evaluation meeting” (P4).

Some of these same elements/vehicles of communication were perceived by default as obstacles, namely concerning the insufficiency of “written messages and video calls” for understanding and being involved in school decisions and the school life of their children. Also, the way of conducting the “collective meetings” was highlighted as a barrier because it often entails “more than one person talking at the same time” and because there was a delay in receiving the information – a “time gap in receiving the information”: “I realized that everyone was talking, and I left.” (P7), “the information comes late, and I get nervous” (P2).

Theme: Children’s experience

Another theme that emerged in the interviewees’ discourse was related to the way children experience this difference – children’s experience/role. Based on the analysis of the interviewees’ discourse in this theme, four categories emerged, namely “resilience, social embarrassment, communication mediators, and the happy experience of schooling”.

Some of the mothers highlighted a “happy experience of schooling” of their children: “As a mother I feel more confident about my child’s education” (P6), “The current situation is that everything is going well” (P10). In contrast, the idea of “social embarrassment” was also present, specifically through the description of discriminatory attitudes by others: “When a friend made fun of her because her parents were deaf, she told us, but they make fun of her for that?” (P10), or “When I go to pick her up, they see us gesturing and they have made fun of it, I didn’t see it, but my daughter was hurt, she felt bad” (P4).

One of the mothers mentioned the importance of the “resilience” and trust shown by the children to ensure the continuity of the parents’ participation in school life, “my second daughter is completely different, she 100% trusts that the mother wants to be there, that she wants to participate” (P7). Finally, some of the mothers mentioned the fact that their children assume the role of *mediators of communication* between the school and the family: “My daughter, yes, when she was 6 or 7 years old, she already helped me” (P10), “My daughter helps in the communication, but she is not an interpreter” (P10).

Theme: Social representation of deafness

The theme “social representation of deafness” was also present in the interviewees’ discourse, focusing on “expectations about (non) participation”, which, from the mothers’ perspective, is due to the fact that they often do not feel an effort on the part of the school to communicate with them and opt for an “easier path” that entails including other hearing family members. This theme also covers another category – the “openness to communication/relationship” – which highlights attitudes of inclusion and promoting communication between mothers and the school/teachers.

Given the “expectations about their (non) participation”, this category encompassed references to an unreciprocated motivation to communicate or establish ties by the school. This perception is revealed in situations of “not inviting to communicate/ participate”, “I want to participate in everything, I want to be called as other mothers are called because

I'm deaf they are ashamed and they do not do it, but I'm able to talk to the teacher (P9), or "they don't call me, they don't tell me anything. It's a bit annoying" (P9). For this reason, mothers feel that school professionals "privilege contact with other family members": "When my son fell, they called his grandmother to warn the family, I was furious because I am the one who is the care-taking parent" (P6), "parents are the second choice because there is the grandfather, the grandmother, etc." (P7). Through the testimony of these mothers, it can be verified that the lack of communication experienced by them stems from a social representation of deafness that is associated with a difficulty of the deaf person, perceived as an inability to communicate, and not as a linguistic difference. If deafness and LGP were assumed by the school and teachers as a linguistic difference, surely the school and the teachers themselves would take the initiative to seek a strategy that would enable communication with these mothers. Other ways to communicate so that there is a dialogue between deaf mothers and the school. Therefore, the motivation to communicate or to establish ties that is unreciprocated by the school reflects this social representation of incapacity, because as one of the mothers mentions (P9) they often do not call her as they do other mothers, leading her to feel that teachers feel shame and discomfort because they think they will not be able to communicate. However, these mothers are not incapable of communicating, it is necessary to resort to a form of communication in which both parties understand each other and can dialogue.

In contrast, a perception of "Openness to communication/relationship" was also present in the mothers' discourse, in which the "Attitude of the educator/teacher and school professionals" is described as encouraging a positive relationship and active participation of parents: "He [the teacher] understands and communication is easier" (P6), "the class manager knows me well and greets me, asks if everything is okay, simple conversations" (P3) or "They are all nice, parents and teachers" (P9). In addition, within the scope of this openness to communication, the "Attitudes of other parents" act as a factor that promotes their involvement: "I thought that we could make a video [for the teacher] in LGP and proposed it. The parents accepted" (P5), "they adapted [the play] for me to participate, they included dance, and I was integrated" (P6).

Theme: Necessary changes

The last theme – "changes" – encompasses three categories that are important to change the reality experienced by deaf mothers and promote their integration in the school life of their children: "the training/capacitation of the school community, the call-center and the generalized existence of interpreters in schools". This is a theme that brings to light lines of action highlighted by the interviewees so that deaf parents feel welcomed in their children's schools and can exercise their right to participate. In this context, one of the guidelines most highlighted by the interviewees was the call for the "Generalized existence of interpreters in schools": "Schools in Portugal need to have interpreters, all of them" (P10), "I wish there were interpreters in all schools at a national level and not

only in the reference schools, you know?” (P2), “one of my dreams is for the interpreters to accompany the teachers” (P4).

Another line of action mentioned was the need to integrate the LGP in the training of the school community, both of all students and professionals: “The subject of LGP should be created, just as the other optional subjects (English, French, etc.) and so communication would be facilitated.” (P9), “I would like them to open their eyes, the employees, the teachers, the municipality, everyone should have a basic LGP training” (P6), “the main thing would be to have training for the entire school community” (P5).

Finally, another change identified as necessary would be the creation of a “call center” for video calls: “If this kind of *call center* existed, accessibility would be much easier” (P7).

Discussion

Through a focus group discussion, this study aimed to describe the involvement of deaf mothers in the school life of their hearing children, exploring how the interaction between the condition of deafness and the environmental characteristics of schools interferes with the exercise of the right and duty to participate in their children's school life, and seeking to identify lines of political action and practices to promote the relationship between the school and these parents. Regarding the first objective, the mothers participating in the study consider that the support they provide in the study carried out at home is the predominant form of involvement in the school life of their children. Formal and informal participation – reflected in the participation in activities initiated or stimulated by the school and the group of parents – was less prevalent though it was the one that was the focus of the entire narrative of the mothers in the identification of the difficulties they experienced. It worth noting that the mothers' narratives reflected the three types of parental involvement described by Park and Holloway (2017) in actions strictly related to the child – private involvement (in support of study and participation in meetings), public involvement (such as in festive activities) and the integration into a parent network. Regarding these three dimensions, the activities that derive from or depend on the relationship with the school community (a condition that is only not part of the study support) were addressed mainly by highlighting the restrictions experienced at the level of participation. This finding corroborates that the existence of obstacles of a communicational nature, but also attitudinal ones, are currently exclusion factors for deaf parents that hinder the achievement of the right and duty to participate in the school life of their children. Quadros and Masutti (2007) described how the school often neglects the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the deaf community:

Most of the time, the school welcomes this hearing child of deaf parents and creates a wall that separates her/him from her/his parents. Within these schools, parents become alien figures, not receiving feedback regarding their children, because most of the schools are not prepared to even understand deaf culture, let alone sign language. This creates a split between the school world

and the intimate universe, spaces that compete in a different way in how they value matters and construct a perspective on reality. (QUADROS; MASUTTI, 2007, p. 256-257).

In this focus group, as in the study by Mallory *et al.* (2019), the parents' relationship with the school was described as an experience that often depends on third parties, namely other hearing family members, and, not infrequently, on the mediation of the children themselves. The role of communication mediation played by the children themselves corroborates the results of Silva (2017) that emphasized the involvement of hearing children of deaf parents to deal with personal and professional issues. Sousa (2012) reinforces that this atypical situation of responsibility attributed to a child results from the circumstance of mastering the two languages and needing to connect two tendentially separate worlds.

This intermediation that makes the connection of parents to school indirect or secondary seems to result from the lack of tools/resources that enable communication but also seems to have at its origin preconceived ideas about deafness that generate expectations of non-participation (i.e., it is assumed that it is better to communicate through another person). Similarly to the concept of self-fulfilled prophecy described by Merton (1949), setting low expectations about the involvement of parents also seems to limit the relationship to the immediate and to search for surrogate contacts under the condition that they share the same linguistic code - that of the hearing. Indeed, in a study developed by Harvey in the late 1980s, this feeling of usurpation of parental authority had already been discussed, in which professionals tended to ignore deaf parents and deal directly with the hearing child or grandparents. As discussed in the study by Silva (2017), this separation of parents from school constitutes the beginning of a disengagement from school life and from support for the study of their child, which negative impact on their academic success.

Moreover, regarding the participation of deaf mothers in the school life of their children and the preconceived ideas about deafness, it was clear that the lack of communication between them and the school and teachers, is rooted in a preconceived idea that there is an inability to communicate, when in fact what exists is a linguistic difference. In this sense, we agree with Witkoski (2009, p. 565) when he says that "by implicitly not accepting the linguistic difference, perceptions of the world and ways of being, these practices mask prejudices. They promote a pseudo-unviability of deafness, carried out under the guise of an alleged integration between deaf and hearing". By viewing the difference of being deaf as a disability, the obstinacy in making the deaf speak in the same way as the hearing is perpetuated and so, that only by adapting to the hearing will the deaf be accepted and included in society (WITKOSKI, 2009), which must be contested. Indeed, these mothers should not feel that they have to make an effort to accompany, for example, the parent meetings because "even when they learn to speak the Portuguese language, the deaf continue not to be accepted in the hearing community, being identified as disabled, due to what many refer to as 'the deaf way' of speaking, referencing truncated speech, the difference in pronunciation or articulatory clarity of words" (WITKOSKI, 2009, p. 566). And even if they manage to do an orofacial reading,

their participation, for example, in collective meetings, continues to be hampered due to the time *gap* in receiving information, since there is a need to know the speaker's codes and the difference in times between reading and the rhythm of speech (VILHALVA, 2004).

Despite these obstacles, the motivation and commitment to be actively involved in the school life of their children – in equality with other parents – is palpable in the discourse of these mothers, which is accentuated in their constant demand and advocacy for the right to participation and the use of facilitators and strategies such as the use of written messages, the assiduous possibility of face-to-face contact, and the use of video calls. As already pointed out by authors such as Moores (1996) and Quigley and Paul (1984), written communication is an important form of communication that helps to dilute barriers between deaf and hearing communities. Mothers also report that face-to-face communication is important to make use of oral/lip-reading and gestures. Technological advances and communication through digital means are considered an important support to overcome communication difficulties with the school insofar as they facilitate the exchange of information, but they cannot serve as a substitute for face-to-face communication (SINGLETON; TITTLE, 2000). In this sense, regarding technology and communication through digital means, it is important to highlight another change pointed out as necessary – the creation of a *call center* –, reflecting what Martins (2018) describes as already used, for example, with 112 (the European Emergency Number), ensuring it is inclusive, as should also happen in the school context. Likewise, the Portuguese Recovery and Resilience Plan can also be referred to, in which the need to create a *call center* for deaf citizens to ensure interpretation services in LGP in real-time throughout the public administration is recognized (MINISTRY OF PLANNING, 2021). This investment and response to structural challenges must also be applied to schools, to support parents and create a channel of communication between parents and the school and teachers. The public school is part of the public services and therefore, reforms and public policies cannot neglect the school. In addition, the Portuguese Federation of Deaf Associations - FPAS also has a *call-center* service that provides an LGP interpreter for remote interpretation services (FPAS, 2020) – these are clear and necessary examples that must be implemented in schools.

Although these strategies assume a practical character, according to the perspective of the mothers, they do not seem sufficient, reinforcing a clear need for more ample awareness and training for their use, but fundamentally the need for common communication platforms using LGP – whether through the support of interpreters or the training of the school community. To this day, the presence of interpreters in the school context has been limited to the classroom and support for the deaf student (LACERDA, 2005; MENDES, 2012), but it is known that their performance must be extended to situations such as those analyzed here: in the mediation between school and deaf parents. In this regard, Silva (2017) stressed that there is a need for at least one LGP interpreter in all schools, which will contribute to improving communication between parents and teachers, encourage parents to go to the school and attend meetings, foster the monitoring of their children's school path, and thus develop the perception of greater support and less responsibility in their children. Indeed, Streiechen, Lemke, and Cruz (2019) also concluded in their study

that most of the participants report difficulties of communication at school due to the lack of a professional translator and interpreter to mediate the communication of the school community with the mother.

According to this study's interviewees, the changes to be included in the family-house relational dynamics concern the school as a whole, including - in addition to the presence of LGP translators and interpreters - a change in curricular plans, particularly the integration of LGP in the training of all students, and the need for training of school actors on the deaf community and their idiosyncrasies.

Reflecting on the policies and practices of educating hearing children of deaf parents necessarily implies that the school modifies practices to make communication through sign language a reality, but it also entails a more comprehensive debate about these students' culture and the challenges that they experience to participate fully in school activities. According to Mélo (2003), it is not the *tolerance* of the forms of expression of the deaf that will solve the whole problem, but rather the understanding of the deaf community, through the idea of (in)formation (in the sense of providing information through training).

These conclusions on the experiences, opinions, and recommendations of mothers should take into account the limitations of this study, namely the limited number of participants and the need to analyze the perspective of other elements involved in the process (specifically school professionals - foreseen in the next stage of this research). In addition, although the focus group implementation complied with the common lines of action systematized by Adler *et al.* (2019), it is important to emphasize that, as an exploratory study, data saturation could not be reached. Therefore, it would be relevant to develop more focus groups with deaf parents of hearing children, and to involve other relevant actors in the future, contributing to the development of knowledge that may foster inclusive practices and policies in this scope.

Final considerations

To sum up, it is important to recover some of the conclusions underscored by Reis (2008). Based on the parents' opinion, the author relates the positive school experience of the children with: (i) the model of proximity that the teacher establishes with the parents, based on real knowledge of each student and each family; (ii) the sharing of information and the way communication takes place, which minimizes parents' anxieties, concerns, and difficulties, promoting a more active participation in school based on an increased pedagogical support; and, finally, (iii) a more effective monitoring of learning activities at home and in free time.

In the present study, deaf mothers described a reality in which restrictions on their participation in the school life of their children predominantly result from communicational and attitudinal obstacles. So, based on the experiences of deaf mothers, the following points can be emphasized as the highest priorities for political action and practices' innovation:

- the training and capacity building of the school community in the basic command of LGP and the knowledge and understanding of the deaf community; the facilitation of access to LGP interpreters in the school context who can support everyone at events, namely in the relationship between professionals and the family;
- the existence of *call-center* platforms, which can support the translation and interpretation of LGP;
- foster awareness of and offer training to the school community, specifically teachers, to expand the strategies used for communication and relationship development with deaf parents, namely the promotion of mediation of face-to-face individual or small group meetings, the use of digital platforms for written communication, and video calls.

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