



International  
Journal of  
Sociology of  
Education



International Journal of Sociology of Education

Volume 14, Issue 2, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2025, Pages 106-123

Online First Published: 19<sup>th</sup> May, 2025

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/rise.15858>

# The Good Pupil Configurations and Performativity in Primary School: Teachers' and Children's Perspectives

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## Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a research project that aims to analyse the fabrication processes of school success and of the good pupil in primary schools in Portugal, taking into account the increasing emphasis placed on quality and academic excellence in educational systems. Although the impact of this performative agenda is relatively mitigated, several studies have clearly shown its effects on secondary education. However, research on primary school has been scarce in recent decades. Based on content analysis of interviews with teachers and children in three case studies conducted in primary schools with different geographical and social backgrounds, a comparison is made of their views on what constitutes a good pupil. The findings echo the performativity agenda and how it is distinctively integrated by teachers and children in the three contexts under analysis, pointing to a reconfiguration of the *métier* of primary school pupil.

## Keywords

School success, good pupil, primary school, teachers, performativity

**To cite this article:** Matias-Diogo, A., Portugal e Melo, B., & Ferreira, M. (2025). The good pupil configurations and performativity in primary school: teachers' and children's perspectives. *International Journal of Sociology of Education*, 14(2) pp. 106-123. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/rise.15858>-

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International  
Journal of  
Sociology of  
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Volumen 14, Número 2, 25 de junio, 2025, Páginas 106-123

Publicado en Online First: 19 de mayo de 2025

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/rise.15858>

## Configuraciones del Buen Alumno y Performatividad en la Escuela Primaria: Perspectivas de Profesores y de Niños

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### Resumen

Este texto presenta los resultados de una investigación que tiene como objetivo analizar los procesos de fabricación del éxito académico y de los buen alumno en las escuelas primarias de Portugal, teniendo en cuenta el creciente énfasis en la calidad y la excelencia académica en los sistemas educativos. Aunque el impacto de esta agenda performativa es relativamente mitigado, varios estudios han demostrado claramente sus efectos en la educación secundaria. Sin embargo, la investigación sobre las escuelas primarias ha sido escasa en las últimas décadas. A partir del análisis de contenido de entrevistas con profesores y niños en tres estudios de caso realizados en escuelas primarias de diferentes contextos geográficos y sociales, se comparan sus perspectivas sobre lo que es necesario para ser un buen alumno. Los resultados revelan algunos ecos de la agenda de performatividad que parece distintivamente incorporada por profesores y niños en los tres contextos analizados, apuntando a una reconfiguración del oficio de alumno de escuela primaria.

### Palabras clave

Éxito escolar, buen alumno, escuela primaria, docentes, performatividad

**Cómo citar este artículo:** Matias-Diogo, A., Portugal e Melo, B., y Ferreira, M. (2025). Configuraciones del buen alumno y performatividad en la escuela primaria: perspectivas de profesores y de niños. *International Journal of Sociology of Education*, 14(2). pp. 106-123. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/rise.15858>

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The growing pressure on educational systems to deliver school outcomes in a performative logic (Ball, 2003; Sellar & Lingard, 2014) has contributed to a shift from the agenda of inequality of opportunities and school failure in primary education to one of quality and academic excellence, both in terms of political concerns and the sociology of education itself. Various studies have highlighted the regulatory mechanisms based on outcomes and the practices based on performative logic developed by agents, especially concerning secondary education in Portugal (Antunes & Sá, 2010; Torres & Palhares, 2014; 2017). It is unknown, however, whether the early levels of schooling, namely primary school, remain unaffected by the dynamics resulting from the performativity known at the higher levels of education or not being the case, how this ideology impacts school dynamics and its most involved actors.

In this sense, the aim of the research ‘De pequenino se torce o menino’<sup>1</sup> is to study the fabrication processes of school success at this level of education (Perrenoud, 1984; Lahire, 2000) amidst increasing demands for educational systems to yield high academic outcomes. By examining how teachers, parents, and children organize themselves around school work, we seek to understand whether these pressures reconfigure primary school dynamics.

This paper focuses on the perspectives of teachers and children regarding what it takes to be a good pupil aiming to identify any reflections of the ideology of performativity in the conceptions of teachers and children that indicate a reconfiguration of the *métier* of a pupil. We begin by analyzing school success in primary school within the context of the shift towards the agenda of quality and excellence. Then we articulate these transformations with the notion of the good pupil from the sociology of education’s different perspectives. Afterwards, the research methodology is presented based on the three case studies and the findings.

### **The Shift in the Agenda: from Failure in Primary School to Performativity**

Primary school and school success at this level of education strongly shaped the beginning of the Sociology of Education in Portugal in the 1970s and 1980s, within the framework of the newly widespread access to school and the policies of democratization of education, which were implemented, above all, after the April Revolution in 1974 and the ensuing transition to a multi-party democratic political regime. Several studies (Benavente & Correia, 1981; Costa & Machado, 1987; Grácio & Miranda, 1977) have evidenced the massive failure in primary school and its connection with class inequalities.

As the Portuguese education system gradually expanded to other levels of schooling, both upstream and downstream, in the following decades, primary school ceased to be at the center of the agenda. Against the backdrop of democratization and equal opportunities, political concerns and sociological analysis of access and attainment shifted mainly to secondary and higher education, and lifelong learning (cf. Machado, 2022).

On the other hand, noticeably from the 1990s and especially the early 21st century, albeit belatedly and in a mitigated manner (Afonso, 2002), the quality and academic excellence agenda began to take hold in Portugal, which represented a shift in focus regarding school success issues. Linked to intensifying globalization and Portugal's greater interdependence

with more advanced capitalist economies, particularly the European Union (Santos & Reis, 2018), at the turn of the century, national education policies and governance became predominantly structured by European and international policy (Antunes, 2001).

The existence of a globally structured agenda for education (Dale, 2000) since the 1980s has been seen as responsible for making states more competitive, as a response to globalization challenges, improving human capital quality (Antunes, 2001). This agenda has resulted in the search for international standards of excellence and quality in education, promoted by international organizations like the European Union (EU) or the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

In this framework, a profound transformation occurred in the education systems regulation methods, turning states into assessors (Afonso, 2002; Ball, 2003; Maroy & Voisin, 2013). Starting in the USA and England in the 1980s, accountability policies spread widely, aiming to promote educational efficiency and effectiveness by applying new public management principles (Verger & Normand, 2015). Following either strong or soft accountability models (Maroy & Voisin, 2013), as in Portugal, the approach was based on a post-bureaucratic logic. Contrary to the previous bureaucratic regulation methods, based on checking compliance with rules and procedures, monitoring became focused on achievement, assessing the producers (schools and agents) and the products (pupil achievements) of school systems.

The growing pressure on educational systems to deliver educational achievements by emphasizing merit and excellence appears to contribute to redefining education's mandate into a performocracy, emphasizing the school's selective function (Brown et al., 2010). Unlike the meritocratic mandate that strongly marked post-war Western societies, based on the idea of merit as a means of providing opportunities for all, this new mandate is governed by a performative logic, according to which what matters are the results achieved, that is, winning (Brown et al., 2010). In this sense, it promotes the hierarchization of results in terms of winners and losers, placing the onus on individual responsibility.

The emergence of the quality and excellence agendas and the subsequent redefinition of the education mandates in Portugal have been widely critiqued in the field of sociology of education studies (cf. Afonso, 2013; Antunes & Sá, 2010; Magalhães & Stoer, 2002; Torres & Palhares, 2014; 2017), contributing to reshaping the research agenda. These works have highlighted various outcomes-based regulatory mechanisms, such as national exams and standardized tests, external school evaluations, rolls of honour, teacher performance assessments, participation in international comparative assessment studies like PISA (Torres et al., 2018), as well as practices developed by agents, such as private tutoring (Afonso, 2013) or pedagogical approaches based on the "blind empire of grades" (Antunes, 2009), across different educational levels, particularly in secondary education.

The impact of this agenda on Portuguese primary schools is mostly unexplored. Could it be that this educational level, due to the pupils early age, remains unaffected by the performance-driven dynamics observed in other levels of schooling? Some evidence seems to justify investigating this issue at this level of education: whether because primary schools in Portugal in recent decades have moved closer to the nature of other educational cycles, with their integration into large bureaucratic structures and the development of teaching practices subject to greater curricular compartmentalization (Formosinho & Machado, 2018); or due to the evidence of distinction mechanisms and a discourse on excellence also encompassing this level

of schooling (Sá & Silva, 2021); or even because studies conducted in contexts marked by 'strong' accountability policies have already shown their effects on primary schools (Bradbury, 2013; 2019; Bradbury et al., 2021; Hall & Pulsford, 2019; Keddy, 2016).

Considering that performativity is a mode of regulating educational systems and a technology imposed externally on educational agents, as well as a culture incorporated by the individuals themselves (Ball, 2003), the research underpinning this text aims to analyze the potential effects of the logic of performativity on the subjectivities and practices of teachers, children and parents in primary school. In this text, we focus on the *métier* of a pupil, examining the conceptions of teachers and children regarding the fabrication of a good pupil.

### **The Métier of the Pupil and Perspectives on the Good Pupil**

Although concerns about school success as a social issue and scientific subject emerged internationally in the 1950s (Forquin, 1982), and the pupil as a social actor was only addressed in the 1970s/80s (Perrenoud, 1984; Willis, 1977), it is possible to infer a conception of what constitutes a good pupil from the early theoretical proposals in the sociology of education.

In Durkheim's initial conception (1992), the school of early modernity aims to instill moral values based on reason, secular and universal, which govern modern Western societies. The education system's mission is to shape pupils progressively as autonomy-endowed individuals, i.e., as citizens, thereby ensuring the integration of modern societies, marked by an increasing social division of labour. The concept of a good pupil is inferred from the emphasis on the integration function, corresponding to the pupil who, above all, adheres to the universal rules that define what Vincent et al. (1994) term as the 'school form'.

The previous approach was complemented by Parsons' structural-functionalism (1959) in the post-war period, in the context of the massification of education, introducing concerns about equal opportunities from a meritocratic perspective. From primary school onwards, a process of progressive differentiation of pupil performance takes place based on universalist criteria. A good pupil in primary school is defined by cognitive and moral dimensions: the one who excels in learning and intellectual tasks and the one who is responsible in behaviour. However, the moral demands the pupil faces take precedence over the intellectual ones at this level of schooling.

Refuting Parsons' thesis that school would allow the ablest to be selected and thus give the best the privileged social positions, reducing the weight of birth, Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) show, based on the theory of cultural reproduction, that the good student is an heir, i.e., it is a student of the dominant class. Success at school is only the illusory product of individual merit and gifts, resulting from the affinity between the embedded class habitus and the apparent neutral and universal school culture.

The deconstruction of the idea of merit, considering that what defines school success and the good pupil is a socially fabricated process based on criteria that are not solely academic (Bourdieu & Saint-Martin, 1970), is taken further by authors who rely on symbolic interactionism. With the notion of the ideal client, Becker (1952) explains that 'good pupil' is a label attributed by teachers to those who meet their expectations in academic performance and behaviour according to the culture and lifestyles found in their class of origin. Converging

in this view, Perrenoud (1984) refers to the fabrication of excellence as a metaphor to highlight the arbitrary nature of school assessment. In primary school, the first hierarchies of excellence are established, and the pupils learn their *métier*. The latter does not only consist of assimilating knowledge. It also involves knowing the rules of the game. A good pupil, beyond the formal curriculum, learns to please the teachers and develops strategies in light of school work and assessment to make a good impression.

Dubet and Martuccelli (1996) deepen the sociological analysis of the pupil as a social actor based on the notion of experience in the context of the growing massification of education, marked by the extension of studies by new groups less familiar with the school and the weakening of the school as an institution. A good pupil is the one who, in addition to integrating into the school order and developing strategies, builds their experience, giving it meaning. In any case, in primary school the deregulation of the school as an institution will be less pronounced, with an enhanced emphasis on social integration.

Even so, it is within a framework of deregulation of the school as an institution, in which the individual is called upon to work on themselves (Dubet, 2010; Dubet & Martuccelli, 1996), combined with the development of strong accountability models that, more recently, a body of Anglo-Saxon work has emerged in which the notion of the good pupil is conceived as a performative pupil, from primary school or even before (Bradbury, 2013; 2019; Bradbury et al., 2021; Hall & Pulsford, 2019; Keddy, 2016; Quick, 2024). These researches have shown that primary school pupils are required to self-regulate and know how to make choices, proving themselves to be entrepreneurial and competitive. The evidence indicates that children realize that being a good pupil depends on effort, hard work, and concentration rather than having innate abilities or following the rules imposed by the school. Furthermore, it is necessary to know how to handle pressure and maintain a positive mindset through emotional self-control. On the other side of the coin, individual responsibility incorporated by children causes them to feel distressed, ashamed, guilty, and stigmatized when they fail. What seems to be at stake here is the reconfiguration of the pupil's *métier* in the first modernity to better adapt it to the school's demands in the second modernity (Melo et al., 2022).

The aim of this research, based on three primary school case studies in Portugal, is to analyze the teachers and children's conceptions of a good pupil to examine if the ideology of performativity is reflected in their discourses and overlaps the dimension of social integration that structures the primary school of the first modernity, highlighting a new model of the good pupil.

### **The Research: Three Case Studies**

The methodological framework of the research followed an intensive strategy based on three case studies, each consisting of one class from public schools in different regions of Portugal, monitored over three school years, from 2016/17 to 2018/19 — from the beginning of Year 2 to the end of Year 4. Data was collected primarily through regular classroom observation and interviews with children, teachers, and parents, respecting all ethical principles.

The three classes — anonymized as Urze, Várzea, and Colina — contrasted significantly in several characteristics summarized below (see Diogo et al., 2023 for more details). The Urze

class (18 children), from an urban school, was socially heterogeneous (44% of mothers had primary education, 22% secondary, and 33% higher education), with 44.4% boys and 20–30% showing excellent academic outcomes. Also urban, the Várzea class (26 children) stood out for its privileged background (61% of fathers and 68% of mothers had higher education), strong academic results (two-thirds excelled), and a balanced gender distribution (42.9% boys). The Colina class (23 children), from a TEIP (Educational Territory of Priority Intervention) school in a suburban area, had a disadvantaged background (100% of fathers and 53% of mothers had only primary education), a male majority (72.7% boys), and under 15% with excellent academic results.

This article presents results from the 2018 semi-directive interviews with children and teachers, when the classes were in Year 3. Children (61, aged 8–9) were interviewed in groups of 2–3. Female teachers, each with about 20 years of experience, were interviewed individually at the school year's end. Interviews underwent categorical thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2009) using QDAMiner software.

The analysis focuses on interview segments in which teachers and children discussed their conceptions of what it takes to be a good pupil, considering only pupil-related factors. Aspects such as teacher roles or family context were excluded for later analysis. Children's interview analysis was previously presented (Melo et al., 2022; Diogo et al., 2023) and is discussed here comparatively with teachers' conceptions.

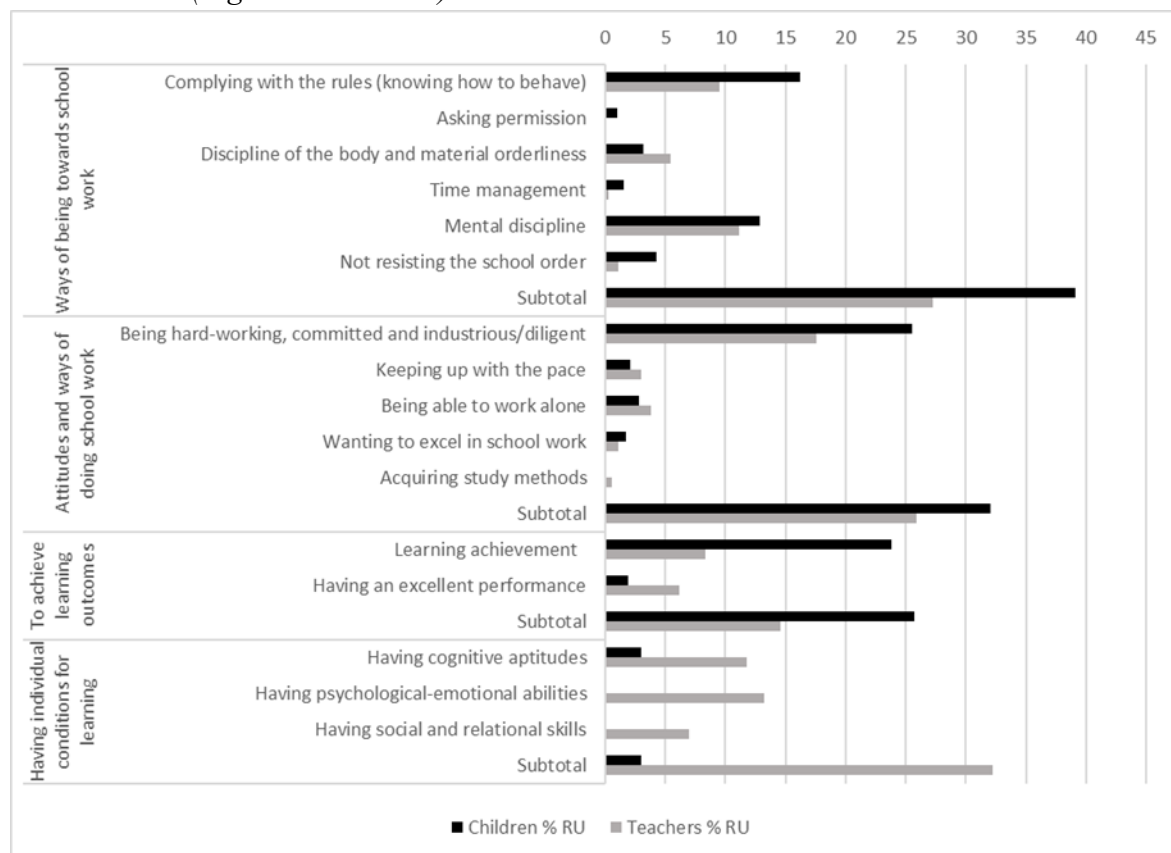
This study seeks to answer: (i) what are children's and teachers' perspectives on being a good pupil?; (ii) are there differences between the three school contexts?; (iii) how is performativity ideology reflected in their conceptions across contexts?

### **A Good Pupil According to the Children and the Teachers**

As with the children (Melo et al., 2022; Diogo et al., 2023), the teachers' conceptions are structured around two fundamental dimensions: conformity to the school order and school learning. Thus, teachers and children seem to incorporate the two main dimensions of the school form emerging from the first modernity into their subjectivities, defining a good pupil as one who appropriates knowledge and internalizes power relations (Vincent et al., 1994). Based on these two dimensions, the children and teachers' conceptions are broken down into four categories of conditions (see figure 1): i) ways of being when dealing with work; ii) ways of doing school work; iii) learning achievement; and iv) having individual conditions for learning.

**Figure 1**

*Conditions for Being a Good Pupil, by Reference to the Pupil's Métier, According to Children and Teachers (registration units\*)*



Source. developed by the authors

\*Total of registration units: children 1151, teachers 370.

### i) Ways of Being towards School Work

Being a good pupil implies, first and foremost, that he or she develops appropriate *ways of being*, *i.e.*, the proper posture and behaviour at school (dimension referring to compliance with the school order). It is necessary to abide by the rules defined by the school (knowing and complying), to ask the teacher for permission in multiple situations, not to resist the school order, and to display discipline of the body and material orderliness, time management, and mental discipline.

Children express concerns about internalising school rules and adhering to the school order far more frequently (39.1% of the children's registration units) than teachers (27.3% of the teachers' registration units), being the condition more often mentioned by the children.

Within these concerns about the *ways of being* at school, the children highlight, through a generic formulation reflecting a certain degree of abstraction of the pupil's role, the need to comply with the rules and display good behaviour. They refer to “following the school rules”, “not misbehaving”, “behaving much better”, “obeying the teacher”, and “not stepping out of line”:

Interviewer: Why are these kids the best? Ildal: They don't talk in class, they don't hit anyone, and they always apologize and follow the rules. (...) We have a big paper in the classroom that says the rules. We have to abide by the rules. (Urze Class)

Among the *ways of being* at school, the children also refer to more specific and practical conditions. To be a good pupil, it is necessary to i) ask the teacher permission for a variety of situations (to go to the toilet, to talk...); ii) internalise time management to be synchronous with the school clock, for example, “only pee at the right times”, “don't play at the time the teacher gives the lesson” or “eat when it rings”; iii) achieving discipline of the body and material orderliness, physically aligning themselves with the school space, thus having to be “quiet”, “not touch the pencils”, “not look back”, “line up in alphabetical order” or “have their desk tidy”; iv) not resisting the school order, i.e., not disrupting it by “throwing tantrums”, “clowning around”, “being silly” or “whistling, throwing rubbers or blowing their nose to get attention”; and, above all, v) displaying mental discipline, managing to be focused by “being attentive”, “listening”, “not taking their eyes off it”, “doing it quietly” regarding “what the teacher is saying” and “what we are doing”.

Although the teachers don't talk as much as the children about the *ways of being* at work, these nonetheless emerge among their main concerns. Firstly, they emphasise the mental discipline as a condition for learning: a good pupil is a pupil who is “attentive”, and “focused” in class, as opposed to a pupil who is “very distracted”, who “can't concentrate”, “always has his head in the clouds”, for whom “everything is a reason to wander off”, who “talks a lot” or “is in his own world”: “In the classroom, because she has a five-star attitude, she's very correct, she pays attention, she helps the classmate next to her, if need be, she helps the classmate, so Madalena is an excellent pupil.” (Várzea Teacher). “Maria is a good pupil. The only reason she doesn't do more is because she's always distracted.” (Colina Teacher)

Secondly, the teachers mention good behaviour and following the rules. Learning and being a good pupil require children to generally mould themselves to the school form, i.e., to be ‘adapted to the rules of the classroom’ and those outside the classroom, which are at the same time social rules expected to have already been assimilated in the previous process of socialization in the family: “Sometimes, the pupils arrive with a considerable lack of rules because they are often brought up by their grandparents and their grandparents let them do everything.” (Urze Teacher)

The attitude of a friendly pupil does not necessarily imply passiveness but must be exercised within the limits of regulated participation: “A very good pupil, therefore, is an excellent pupil and... a well-rounded pupil. A pupil who doesn't disturb, rather who knows how to behave, who actively participates in lessons (...).” (Várzea Teacher)

Although with less emphasis, the teachers still refer to the discipline of the body and material orderliness. The need for correct posture (“how they sit”) is less mentioned than by the children. They mainly emphasize material orderliness: being a good pupil requires that you be organized, that you invest in the presentation and organization of your work and materials, that you take care of your handwriting, and that you don't forget your materials.

## ii) Ways of Doing School Work

A second set of conditions for being a good pupil relates more directly to the work that pupils have to carry out, in other words, the ways of doing school work, which involves the need to be hard-working, committed, and industrious/diligent to keep up with the pace of work, to work alone, to want to stand out in school work, and to acquire study methods. These demands are highlighted by both children (32.1%) and teachers (25.9%), although it is the children who value them more (it is the second most mentioned category by children and the third by teachers).

For the children, the ways of doing school work fundamentally translate into attitudes towards work and modes of working that are in line with the pupil's *métier* in the first modernity, i.e., the “officiant-worker” (Melo et al., 2022; Sarmiento, 2011). They emphasize the need to be hard-working, committed, and industrious/diligent when they say that it is necessary to “do the work in the classroom”, “always do the work”, “do the homework”, “study a lot”, “study everything”, “read twice”, “study at home”, “train”, “make an effort”, as opposed to those who “don't want to work” or “don't do their homework”. A good pupil has to “do their homework, study, write down what they need to” (Rute, Várzea class), and is also a pupil who “works harder than everyone else” and “does their homework well”.

Furthermore, a hard-working pupil is not simply industrious/diligent. He or she goes beyond merely completing the expected tasks. For some, he or she also takes the initiative, taking charge of their learning and showing themselves to be proactive:

Marlene: We have to work, make an effort, do all the homework, or even more... For example, the teacher tells us to do an arithmetic problem three times... No! Do 4, for example... If we want, we do 3; if we wish, we do 4! It's better to do 4 to learn more! Even if we don't want to, we must do it because we know the teacher will be glad, and... It's not that she'll be glad... She might be angry, but at least we'll be glad because we know that... we're doing things right... (Várzea class).

In some cases, it's about persevering in work with an explicitly performative purpose, thus referring to: “striving to get good grades”, ‘continuing to strive’, ‘trying our best’, “not giving up”, “it's trying, it's trying to get good grades, trying to pay attention”, “trying to get good outcomes”.

For the teachers, just as for the children, the ways of doing school work are transposed into attitudes towards work and modes of working that are characteristic of the pupil's *métier* in the first modernity. A good pupil must *keep up with the pace* and, most of all, *be hard-working, committed, and industrious/diligent*, which means “studying”, “working”, “practicing”, with endeavour and discipline, i.e., fulfilling their tasks, being “a busy bee”, rather than being “lazy”, “too relaxed”, “not putting much effort into wanting to do things”.

More than the children, the teachers emphasize ways of working that require the pupil to be personally involved. Thus, the working pupil is also described as “engaged”, “curious”, “wanting to know”, “wanting to work”, in an attitude towards work that indicates their intrinsic motivation, a given maturity, and an active role. The demands of school work, imposed from

outside, are appropriated and incorporated into the pupil's motivation as a responsible and self-regulated pupil (Bradbury, 2013, 2019; Keddy, 2016):

He loves to read. He loves to study. He loves to know. He goes home, and he looks things up by himself. And he asks his mother for books, and he asks his mother for this, and he asks his mother for everything he needs to learn. (Teacher Colina)

### iii) To Achieve Learning Outcomes

To be a good pupil, it is still necessary to *achieve learning outcomes*, i.e., to achieve the knowledge and curricular goals set for each school year, which can also mean having an excellent performance. This category appears considerably more in the discourse of children (25.7%) than in that of the teachers (14.6%).

For the children, it's essentially about “knowing”, “learning”, “and understanding”, i.e., mastering the curricular content fully and not partially or superficially, because they consider that a good pupil has to “always know everything”, “know everything by heart”, and has to “understand well”, “learn things straightly”, “learn very well”, which requires continuous learning and memorizing: “Interviewer: Why are they the best? Sílvia: Because sometimes they're paying attention, and they're able to handle the subject. Interviewer: How do you handle it? Sara: By paying attention. Sílvia: And it stays in the brain.” (Urze class)

Similarly to the children, for the teachers, achieving the curricular knowledge and goals is a prerequisite for school success and passing the year, meaning that the pupil has “acquired the skills needed in the curricular areas” “to pursue their studies successfully”. It implies “consolidation” of the multiple expected learning achievement. It implies “consolidating” the multiple expected learning, namely: “writing well and reading well”, “knowing how to interpret”, “knowing how to reason and calculate”, and “knowing how to interpret statements and then being able to solve them”. The teachers specify it through more precise indicators, such as “constructing punctuated and well-organized texts”, and “constructing texts with a beginning, middle, and end”.

More than the children, the teachers clarify that to achieve learning outcomes is not a sufficient condition for defining an excellent pupil, i.e., the pupil with a “very good” evaluation, as distinguished from the “sufficient” or “good” pupil. Excellence requires being very good in all curricular areas, and standing out on merit: (...) “they are pupils who are really good at what they do and sometimes, for example, they already had Very Good at everything in previous years” (Urze Teacher).

Not only the cognitive dimension of learning counts, but also the behavioral dimension. An excellent pupil is “complete”. He or she has to be very good in these two dimensions and be consistent, never failing: “Ah, my “number one” (laughs). She really is my “number one”. Antónia is that pupil who, before I correct, for example, a test, I know the grade she's getting. She never fails. She's a constant pupil.” (Teacher Várzea)

#### iv) Individual Conditions for Learning

Finally, being a good pupil requires having certain *individual conditions for learning*, in other words, being endowed with personal qualities, such as cognitive aptitudes, psychological-emotional abilities, and social and relational skills. This category presents the starkest differences between children and teachers, with teachers mentioning it the most (32.2%) and children the least (3.0%).

The children refer to the need to “be smart”, “be intelligent”, not “the dumb kid in the class”, and above all, to be “smarter”, which implies a mental capacity ensured by having “a good head” or a “big brain” that allows you to “store” knowledge, in other words, cognitive aptitudes as natural gifts: (...) “to be a good pupil you need a good head to know how to store things.” (Colina class).

However, it is mainly the teachers who refer to personal prerequisites for learning. Like the children, they refer to the need for the pupil to have cognitive aptitudes, mentioning that a good pupil “has plenty of skills”, “is an intelligent child”, “understands everything well”, “learns easily”, “has a good memory”, “memorizes everything”, “can assimilate”, and also has “good reasoning”, and is “curious”: (...) “very intelligent. He memorizes everything you tell him. Everything! If I say: Learn by heart this here, it is memorized in a bit. He has an incredible capacity for memorization. Very much so.” (Colina teacher)

It is a skill attributed to the child as a fixed condition rather than something that can evolve: each child has their “own skill”, as Colina's teacher says about one of her pupils: “He progresses a lot, within his capabilities”. However, the teachers highlight the significance they attach to two other types of prerequisites: psychological-emotional abilities as social and relational skills. In this way, they widely mention that performing the pupil's *métier* successfully and with academic attainment can only be guaranteed when the child has adequate psychological-emotional abilities, such as “maturity” and “emotional stability”, “good self-esteem”, “self-confidence”, and is “resilient” and “responsible”: (...) “that the pupil is also emotionally stable, because I believe that one of the biggest barriers to learning is that the pupil is not emotionally well.” (Várzea teacher)

These are conditions for other conditions to be met, such as working, working at pace, being focused, performing well, and meeting the teacher's expectations. In contrast, a pupil who does not meet these standards is defined as “nervous”, “fragile”, “childish”, “sulks” and “doesn't know how to deal with frustrations”, “needy”, often requiring psychological support and medication: “But then when we see pupils on medication, because they really need it, not because 'I feel like it' or because... We saw that Tomás really needed it (...) because he calmed down.” (Colina teacher)

Moreover, for teachers, social and relational skills are relevant conditions for pupils to perform their roles well. It means “being sociable” and “having moral values”, which translate into “getting on well with others”, “being liked”, “not being rude”, “being helpful”, “sharing” or “being empathetic”:

(...) In social terms, she's a pupil who gets on with everyone and is very conscientious and really fair, and sometimes, when something happened outside, she would come and tell me about it in a very mature way for her age. (Várzea teacher)

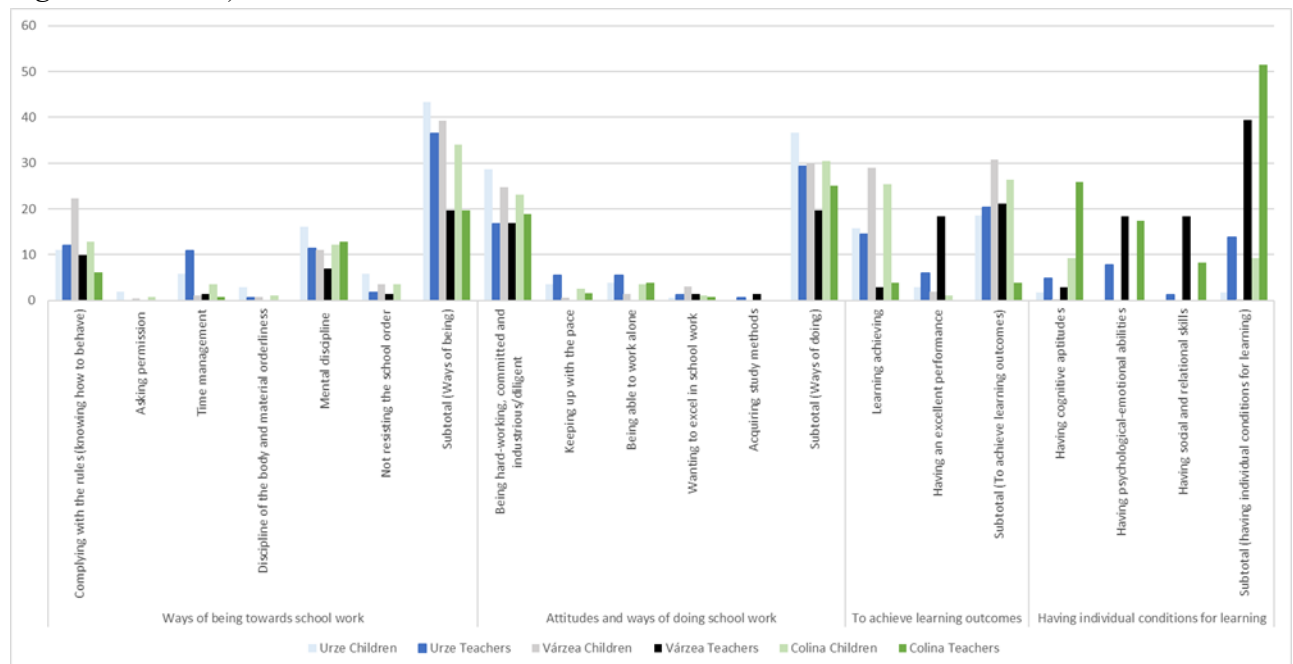
In summary, children's and teachers' conceptions regarding what constitutes a good pupil or what it takes to be one largely coincides, but distinctions arise that set these actors apart. For the first group, it is necessary to comply with the rules, have mental discipline, be hardworking, and achieve curricular knowledge and goals, while for the second group, although these conditions are recognized, the emphasis is on the importance of having individual conditions for learning: having cognitive aptitudes, having psychological-emotional abilities, and social and relational skills. Overall, the teachers' speeches seem to incorporate more distinct signs of a school order based on individual self-regulation of effort and emotions inherent to performativity (Quick, 2024). However, it is worth understanding whether the children's and teachers' conceptions are affected by the differences that characterize each of the three contexts in which they find themselves or, in other words, whether there is a context effect in the way how performativity shapes the conceptions of a good student.

### **Configurations of being a Good Pupil in the Three Contexts**

Although it is the children, rather than the teachers, who mention the *ways of being* in the three contexts, Urze class stands out for having more references to this condition for being a good pupil were made, not only when comparing the children, but also when comparing the teachers (the teachers in the other two contexts place more importance on having individual conditions for learning) (see figure 2). This class also stands out for being the one where the children and their teacher specify the *ways of being* to a greater degree (mental discipline, discipline of the body and material orderliness) rather than mentioning compliance with rules in a more abstract and general sense. It indicates the central role of issues relating to norms and behaviours in the interaction between teachers and pupils in Urze class. It is a hypothesis to be tested in future work based on the records of the observations.

**Figure 2**

*Children's and Teachers' Conceptions of What it Takes to be a Good Student, by Context (% registration units)*



Source: developed by the authors

\*Total of registration units: Urze (363 children, 167 teachers), Várzea (485 children, 71 teachers), Colina (303 children, 132 teachers).

It is also the children from these three contexts who most often mention the category regarding the *ways of doing school work*, emphasizing that to be hard-working is the most significant factor to be a good pupil. However, it is also in Urze class that both the children and their teacher most emphasize conditions related to the ways of doing school work.

The value given to achieving the learning outcomes is highlighted more by the children in the Várzea and Colina classes than their teachers and the children in Urze. In all three contexts, however, when the children mention this category, they allude to the idea that a good pupil needs to achieve the learning outcomes set by the curriculum goals. Only in the discourse of some teachers, especially at Várzea, does the distinction between success and excellent performance arise.

Finally, as has been observed, the teachers are the ones who most often address the *individual conditions for learning*. We can now verify that this is the case, particularly for the teachers in the Várzea and Colina classes. In the former, they emphasize psychological-emotional abilities and relational skills, and in the latter, cognitive aptitudes and psychological-emotional abilities. On the other hand, although the children made little mention of these conditions, the Colina class stood out regarding cognitive aptitudes.

### Concluding Remarks

The findings of this analysis indicate that the children's and teachers' conceptions of what it takes to be a good pupil largely coincide, but there are some relevant differences. According to the children, a good pupil needs, in particular, to follow the rules, have mental discipline, be hard-working, and achieve curricular knowledge and goals. For the teachers, a good pupil must also meet these requirements identified by the children, but they don't emphasize the *ways of being* at school as much as they do, especially compliance with the rules. In addition, the children emphasize the need to be hard-working, committed, and industrious/diligent, while the teachers tend to emphasize that good pupils equally need to be engaged and autonomous. However, the teachers' conceptions are distinct in particular because of the importance they attach to the individual conditions for learning, namely having cognitive aptitudes, psychological-emotional abilities, and social and relational skills.

It is curious that, when it comes to the school's imposition on the children, they are more likely to refer to the process of disciplining their bodies and minds than the teachers, for whom this process seems naturalized and made invisible. The first modernity school model, based on the principle of social integration (Dubet & Martuccelli, 1996; Durkheim, 1992; Vicent et al., 1994), not only remains a structuring dimension of primary school but also seems to be more overvalued by the children than teachers. As it was seen, the latter expect the children to enter primary school pre-socialized in this model.

On the other hand, more than the children, the teachers prioritize personal prerequisites (namely psychological-emotional), work modes that require engagement and autonomy, and the importance of having excellent outcomes. In brief, a performative pupil who demonstrates self-regulation of their work effort, attitudes and emotions (Quick, 2024).

Nevertheless, the conceptions of the good pupil and the references to performativity are configured differently in the three contexts. This configuration seems to be closely associated with the social background, gender, and academic outcomes of the children in each context. Thus, the Colina class, with a markedly disadvantaged social and academic composition, is notable for the emphasis placed on individual conditions for learning, namely the requirement for cognitive aptitudes. It connotes, above all, a deterministic and naturalistic view of success, more in line with the school of the first modernity. As for Urze class, in a more heterogeneous context regarding social background and school outcomes, it is where the teacher and the children most value the *ways of being* and doing school work. Here, the notion of a good pupil is firmly anchored in the dimension of social integration, but there are also some signs of concern about performance. Finally, in Várzea class, with the most privileged context regarding social backgrounds and academic achievement, the teacher's and the children's conceptions of a good pupil seem more clearly to incorporate the logic of performativity evinced in their concerns with achieving excellent outcomes, with a performative way of working and possessing individual psychological, emotional, and relational prerequisites as conditions for learning and success.

Since the research is still in progress, the analysis presented here allows for a provisional conclusion that the pressure to deliver academic outcomes, within a performative perspective, is not exclusive to the more competitive schooling levels, but has some echoes in the early educational levels even in a country like Portugal, where the quality and excellence agenda has

relatively mitigated contours. These echoes, however, are not limited to the regulatory devices based on outcomes, such as the honour roll or the existence of exams. This logic seems to lay deeper in that we find signs of its incorporation by the educational agents most directly involved, teachers and children. However, this ideology of performativity manifests through varying resonances, depending on the social and academic characteristics of the contexts under analysis.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank the teachers, families and children of the classes at Urze, Colina and Várzea schools who agreed to take part in the three case studies, giving us their informed consent, made this research possible.

This work is financed by national funds through FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., within the scope of the project «UIDB / 04647/2020» of CICS.NOVA – Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Translator note: The portuguese proverbial saying ‘De pequenino se torce o pepino’, uses the word ‘pepino’ (cucumber) instead of ‘menino’ (little boy), being ‘pepino’ a metaphor for little boy. The meaning of this saying is equivalent to the english saying: the twig is bent, so is the tree inclined.

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