

# Family education and implications for partnership with schools in Spain

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## **The family as an Educational and Learning context**

One of the most influential social contexts for the development of human beings, which constitutes a true factor of individual and social diversity, is the family microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). It is the first social context that embraces individuals, and from which they receive the greatest influences all through life due to the direct relationship maintained with the family members.

From the Ecological model of Bronfenbrenner, also known as *System of Systems*, it is considered that the diverse social environments where individuals interact, and which influence their development, are cupped one into another, graphically shaping a concentric system which starts with the set of values, principles and norms predominant in a particular culture (Macrosystem). This macrosystem directly influences the characteristics of those communitarian environments in which individuals interact (Exosystem). These, in turn, condition the nearest environments in which children develop, such as the family and the school, with which they interact directly (Microsystems). These microsystems do not remain isolated, but are, in turn, interacting and modifying one another through the Mesosystem. All this web of bi-directional and dynamic relationships among the already mentioned systems have an influence on individuals (Ontosystem), thus conditioning both their development and socialization processes, as well

as the products, results and achievements that derived from them.

Taking this model into consideration, we can understand the family as a *social, educational and learning context, which may contribute, given the adequate conditions, to the human and personal development of all its members, either children, young people or adults, in any evolutive developmental stage* (Laosa and Sigel, 1982; Millán, 1996; Rodrigo and Palacios, 1998). But it also contributes to the *social development*, given the socialization function that the family carries out through education (Inkeless, 1966; Hoffman, 1984; Martínez González, 1994a; Segalen, 1993).

The family microsystem influences the personal development of the individuals as a consequence of what happens in three basic family dimensions: structural, attitudinal and behavioral (Martínez González, 1994<sup>a</sup>, 1996a). Many parents are conscious of the fundamental role they play in their children's development and process of socialization, and because of that, more and more frequently they demand information and education to better cope with the challenges of both, every evolutive stage of the individual and family development (Martínez González, 1990, 1994b, 1998, 1999; Martínez González and Corral Blanco, 1991, 1996). Parents' education constitutes an unfulfilled subject in our society and educational system, from which the education of individuals is articulated in multiple phases and for the development of multiple functions, but it does not consider the necessary education to

perform one of the most complex and with more social responsibility function: to be educators of children for life.

### **Family education**

This takes us to consider the need to develop the disciplinary field of *Family Education* (Martínez González, 1999). Arcus and his colleagues (1993) have pointed out three main *aims* to be reached through this Education: 1) to facilitate families their contribution to both, the development of the individual potential of their members and the family as a whole, 2) to prevent family problems from arising, and 3) to help families to overcome the difficulties they may come across at any time.

From these aims we can draw the *Objectives* towards the practice of parents' education should tend to, and which have been proposed by the National Commission on Family Life Education and the National Council on Family Relations (USA). According to Thomas and Arcus (1992), these objectives can be summarized in *strengthening and enriching the individual and family well-fair*. These general objectives can be made concrete in the following *specific objectives*: 1) To learn to understand oneself and the others, 2) to facilitate the developmental and human behavior processes within the family all through the different stages of family life, 3) to be familiar with marriage and family patterns and processes, 4) to acquire effective strategies for family life, 5) to stimulate the individuals' potential to perform family roles at present and in the future, and 6) to facilitate the development of abilities to keep the family together when difficulties arise.

The attainment of these objectives should be guided by some *Principles* associated to Family Education practice, which takes into account the *individuals' and families' needs*, as well as the *respect for the diversity of circumstances and values of the families* (Arcus, Schvaneveldt & Moss, 1993).

The aims, objectives and principles we are considering should be concentered in the practice of Family Education, which leads us to mention the *Contents* of the programmes and actions that could be undertaken. These contents can be classified into two main areas, according to the National Council on Family Relations (1984): 1) Thematic Areas and 2) Processes of communication decision taking and problem solving.

These main processes to be developed when putting Family Education into practice need a setting and some agents, which may both be diverse, but maybe they efficiency is higher when developed in the school setting by its educational agents. This context allows us to take into consideration the Mesosystem mentioned by Bronfenbrenner (1979), from which bi-directional relationships among the two main microsystems can be analyzed: the family and the school.

### **Mesosystem: family-school partnership**

In several articles we have pointed out the importance of promoting satisfactory family-school relationships (Martínez González, 1992<sup>a</sup>, 1996<sup>a, b, c</sup>; Martínez González and Corral Blanco, 1991, 1996), as well as the methodological aspects related to action-research that may lead to the effective implementation of processes in this field (Martínez González, 1992b, 1997).

The need to promote family-school partnership does not come just from conceptual and theoretical considerations, but also from the parents' demands for information, participation and education; thus, this need is experiential and real and not merely conceptual. This is the conclusion which comes from many studies carried out on this subject; for example, in case studies developed through action-research in Spanish schools (Martínez González et al., 1994), parents, teachers and students came across the following partnership needs: 1) to communicate more in order to put in common the *educative objectives* that both, parents and teachers have as

regards the child/student, 2) to dialogue and act together more frequently so that teachers can better know *parents' attitudes and behaviors* as regards their children, 3) to communicate more often to talk about *parents' and teachers' concerns*, 4) to improve actions that help *parents to better bring up their children*, and 5) to

organize more activities to *stimulate parents participation at school*.

In another study conducted by Martínez González et al. (1993) with 328 parents, we could notice again the need to promote parents' participation at schools, as it is shown in the following table:

*Comparative table of percentages y ranks associated to parents' agreement with several issues related to their children's school*

	Very much	Little	Nothing at all	Do not know	No answer
It is easy to contact teachers	80,5 (1)	11,6 (4)	0,6 (4)	3,0 (5)	4,3 (2,5)
Parents are welcome to school	76,2 (2)	6,4 (5)	0,0 (5)	13,1 (2)	4,3 (2,5)
Teachers are polite and communicative with parents	73,2 (3)	17,7 (3)	2,7 (3)	3,4 (4)	3,0 (5)
Teachers try to help students who have learning difficulties	57,9 (4)	18,0 (2)	4,9 (2)	15,5 (1)	3,7 (4)
The school organizes activities in which parents can participate and contribute to their children's education	38,1 (5)	29,9 (1)	13,4 (1)	12,8 (3)	5,8 (1)

Given these needs, it seems appropriate to promote actions that stimulate communication among parents, teachers and students which, in turn, facilitate their co-operation in school activities, so that schools can gain educational quality. Among the most relevant initiatives to be developed in this area is *teachers' training for partnership* (Davies, 1996; Martínez González, 1996; OCDE, 1997). To this regard, we have organized an *Action-Training Seminar* at the Department of Education (Oviedo University, Spain) composed of professionals *who develop their educational activity in different academic levels*: principals and teachers of state and semi-state schools, involved in Kindergarten, Primary and High school levels, University teachers of Education and Pedagogists. Through *co-operative action-research* we have arranged parents and

teachers groups at the schools, which is allowing us to evaluate and detect partnership needs and to organize some activities to provide them with appropriate answers (Martínez González et al, 2000).

#### **Parents' education programmes**

One of the most needed co-operation actions pointed out by both, parents and teachers in many studies, is parents' education. For example, in a study carried out with Spanish parents about issues related to the prevention of drug consumption from the family context, Martínez González et al. (1998) found out that 64% of the sample admitted they did not have enough information to start doing something in case their children should get into drug problems.

Do you have enough information to be able to start doing something in case your child gets into drug problems?

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	98	29.9
No	210	64.0
No answer	20	6.1
Total	328	100.0

Parents' education, as we have mentioned before, constitutes a clear lack in our educational system, to which some associations or agencies are trying to find an answer. Parents' education can take a diversity of formats, but it seems more effective when it is developed through programmes which incorporate active and participatory methodologies (Bartau et al., 1999; Martínez González, 1999).

The perspective which has dominated the *Design* of these programmes is that proposed by Tyler, based on the *attainment of aims and objectives*. These perspective has led to a *Summative evaluation tendency*, directed to assess to what extend these objectives are reached, many times forgetting to take into account the contexts and

circumstances that affect the development of the programmes. It is a perspective mainly focused on a *quantitative approach* of programme evaluation in which the *relationship between costs and benefits* are looked for, and which is mainly performed through *experimental methodologies*.

The objectives defined for the programmes must be coherent with the educational needs parents have. Because of that, it is recommended to analyze and to identify these needs through a previous evaluation process. For example, before developing a programme with parents of teenagers, the following parents' needs were detected:

parents' concerns about their children's bringing up	learning expectations to take part in the programme	reasons for taking part in the programme
To be able to <b>guide him properly</b> That he loses interest in his <b>studies</b> The time he <b>spends out</b> and the <b>friends he has</b> That he may consume <b>drugs</b>	To have a better relationship with my teenager and to learn to bring him up properly	Because he has a difficult age and I have doubts about the future and whether I am doing things properly
To help them to cope with this critical age of adolescence Their <b>friends</b> , hobbies, their activities during the weekends ( <b>drugs, tobacco, alcohol</b> ) Their interest in their <b>studies</b> , their <b>future</b> <b>Lies</b> The <b>limits</b> of behavior	To <b>understand them</b> , to <b>communicate</b> with them, to <b>accept them</b> as they are	To be in <b>contact with other parents</b> who have similar problems and to learn from them and from the coordinator of the programme
She does not like <b>studying</b> and she does not make <b>any effort</b> at all. She always has to have the <b>last word</b> . Her <b>friends</b>	To be able to help my daughter to learn how <b>to behave correctly</b> both, at home and outside.	To learn to understand them.
What worries me most about my son are <b>drugs</b> His <b>friends</b> That he does not know how <b>to cope with problems</b>	<b>How I should behave</b> when he has a problem	To learn <b>to understand</b> what is happening around me
That they may consume <b>drugs</b> Their <b>friends</b> , the <b>environment</b> How they should <b>cope with failure</b> .	<b>How I should behave</b> when problems arise	To learn

Once the programme has been designed, it can be *developed and evaluated*.

### Programme evaluation

According to Arcus et al. (1993), the evaluation of family education programmes is seldom performed, and when it is so it is usually done taking into account a *Summative approach*, based on the analysis of results according to the previously proposed *objectives* and the *cost-effectiveness relationship*, accountability and funding. The *quantitative research methodology using experimental and survey designs* is applied in this evaluative perspective. According to this author, there is a need to incorporate a *Formative*

*approach* to family education programme evaluation, where *processes* are taken into account in order to analyze to what extent *all the factors* involved in the design and development of the programme, including objectives, are suitable (Stufflebeam et al., 1971). It is also important to consider *parents' interpretation* of the programme because they affect the results obtained. The aim, in short, is to identify, even before the programme has finished, which factors and processes can be improved and where the programme must be reoriented. The Joint

Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation has proposed standards to ensure the quality of programme evaluation (1994), which are classified into four categories: 1) Utility, 2) Feasibility, 3) Propriety and 4) Accuracy.

In this sense, in our Department of Education at Oviedo University, we have developed an evaluative research on parenting education programmes which gathers parents' opinions and evaluation on every phase of the programmes (Martínez González et al., 1998): 1) Organization of the educational activities, 2) Introduction of the activities, 3) Contents, 4) Methodology, 5) Coordination, and 6) Evaluation.

A fundamental issue in the evaluation of programmes is to identify the *indicators* and procedures which inform about the quality of the programme and the extent in which the expected results are being reached. Once the indicators have been introduced and the results of the programmes analyzed, it is possible to observe not only the positive effects obtained but also their limitations.

One of the most generally used indicators in the evaluation of educational activities is the *degree of satisfaction* that people get from participating in them. This indicator could be made concrete through the suggestions these people make in order to foster other people's participation, and also through the degree of interest that they themselves feel to participate in a similar activity again. In this sense, most of the parents (93%) who participated in a study carried out by Martínez González et al. (1998), informs that they would certainly encourage other parents to participate in such educational activities, and 84.2% of them admitted that they themselves would participate once more. 10.5% said they would not participate and 5.3% did not answer.

An example of some of the reasons parents pointed out to encourage the participation of other parents are the following:

*'Yes, I would participate again to better understand drugs dependency and the way this can be prevented'*

*'Yes, because these educational activities help to understand how to have a better relationship with your children and your partner'*

*'Yes, because many things can be learnt; they solve your doubts and also you can share your impressions with those of other parents; it is important to talk and to listen, especially in a time in which we lack communication'*

*'Yes, but you find few people interested in these kind of activities. Nevertheless I would recommend them so as to learn new strategies and to have a reason to go out'*

### Conclusions

Taking conceptual, methodological and practical issues on intervention in the family as referential, it seems there is a need to reflect on the practice of family education, on the development of educational programmes for parents and on their evaluation. More and more frequently, parents are demanding parenting education and schools could try to give them an answer organizing parenting programmes as a way to promote partnership. Many parents does not show an interest in taking part in decision making processes about schools policies, but they are really interested in learning about how they can promote a better communication with their children to effectively contribute to their development. Parenting programmes carried out within schools can help to build effective parents-teachers partnership.

These reflections should allow us to project some actions for the future which are needed to keep on advancing in this disciplinary field of Family Education on both, theoretical and practical grounds. They have to do with epistemological and methodological issues, as well as with considering diversity within the family and the role of the family educator. In these fields we need to keep on advancing to generate evidence about the impact that Family Education has on individuals, families and the society as a whole.

That is to say, we need to analyze to which extent individual, the family, the school and the society, parents' education is really preventive and as it is derived from its main objective. contributes to strengthen and enrich the

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