

Family-School Relationship: Conceptual Contributions Drawn From Evidence in Argentina

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Abstract – The aim of this study is to contribute to the development of education policies, curricular designs and pedagogical proposals putting forward the complex and diverse relationship between families and schools. In this sense, a qualitative analysis was carried out collecting data from 28 in-depth semi-structured interviews with state and private secondary schools headmasters between 2011 and 2015; and supplemented by the analysis of 32 scientific articles from different countries published between 2013 and 2016.

The conclusions reveal that thinking of the strengthening of the family-school relationship is not only a matter of distance between parents and schools but a political issue that involves the questioning of what place the student, who is defining and carrying out their own training as a citizen, occupies in school life.

Keywords – Family And School, School Choice, Participation, Argentina, School Headmasters.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Argentina, children's education was almost exclusively a family responsibility until 1884; it was the families that provided for the satisfaction of children's needs and the acquisition of socialization skills, without the intervention of any state institution. From that year onwards, school education became compulsory, in a scenario characterized by industrialization and the advancement of science and technology, which required an increasingly skilled labor.

The school in Argentina was built up as a "second home" intended to fulfill the schooling function regardless of what could happen at home; schools should complete children's training, family included or not. In this sense, it was the main responsible for "standardizing" and "homogenizing" a heterogeneous population, composed of immigrants, natives, creoles, etc., on the basis of a false unified sense of national identity.

Thus, a process of separation between the two institutions was registered, coinciding with the specialization of the pedagogical labor, which delimited spaces and tasks to be undertaken by each actor: families should bring up the "newcomers," whereas the school should primarily teach reading, writing and calculus. In recent years, the family-school relationship began to be considered from a framework of reciprocity and convergence that tends to foster children's development through mutual collaboration.

But in contemporary society, this daily relationship between schools and families became more complex, and even contradictory [1] allowing some expressions on different forms of family contract to be observed, and that suggest a certain misbalance between the behaviors and

the assessment patterns of the established social order of the time [2]. This process triggered the deployment of integration and social discipline-oriented institutional devices and practices, such as the regulation of parental authority; the implementation of official controls, such as health, police, tax and labor controls, among others, as mandatory; and state primary schooling.

Thus, family is approached as an object of study in its complexity, on the basis of its structural diversity and multiple and changing needs. The separation between sexuality and procreation led to a diversity of forms of expressions of sexuality outside the family context and transformations in patterns of family formation [3]. The increasing individuation and autonomy of youths and women that weakened patriarchal power also brought in a great temporary instability of the traditional family structure and allowed more room for the expression of alternative individual options.

In this sense, family is regarded as a social institution with a power structure, and ideological and emotional components, where production and reproduction relations are deployed between its members as holders of diverse interests that contribute to the formation of homes [4].

These transformations triggered a plethora of family formation styles interwoven with daily life democratization processes that resignify and invite to rethink the family crisis idea on the basis of the innovations introduced by society through its evolution. Moreover, this leads to reflect on the need to strengthen new approaches that guide the design and implementation of education policies focused on real family issues. These dimensions of analysis are being discussed and recreated in the field of the social sciences [4] [5] [6] [7] [8].

II. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this paper is in line with family-school relationship studies oriented to analyze qualitatively the characteristics of the students' families, the choice of schools and the role of the socio-economic dimension in family participation strategies.

For this purpose, data has been collected through the following sources of information:

Oral Sources: interviews to state-run and private secondary schools headmasters in the city of La Plata, provincial capital of Buenos Aires, whose educational system is the largest in Argentina. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted personally to this effect. The characteristics of the sample are shown in **Table I:**

Table I. General characteristics of the sample.

Management	Number of head masters interviewed	Gender	Seniority in years	Education	Access to position	Number of students	Socio-economic sector
State	16	13% M 87% F	Between 2 and 10	16 with teaching training	16 by selection	Between 150 and 2000	Middle and low sectors
Private	12	70% M 30% F	Between 1 and 7	8 with teaching training/4 other profession	12 upon request	Between 140 and 500	Medium-low, medium and high sectors

Documental Sources: the latest contributions on family-school relationship published in scientific journals, whose

Table II: Characteristics are shown in

Date	Type of source	Place	Total
2009-2016	Articles published in scientific journals	Spain	9
		United States	9
		Argentina	6
		Mexico	2
		Other ¹	6
Total			32

The analysis strategy used in this piece of research is content analysis, which includes the categorization, fragmentation and codification of data. The categorization responds to the following dimensions of analysis: I) families' school choices; II) the role of the socio-economic dimension in family participation strategies; III) the strategies developed by educational institutions to interact with the families.

III. RESULTS

Families and School: Contributions of the Field of Study

In this context, there are some studies that link the socio-economic level with the academic success, arguing that the higher the socio-economic level, the better the school performance. The studies of Berends [9] in United States, and Mairs [13] in Northern Ireland and Switzerland, point out that school and schooling factors contribute to both social inequality and productivity.

In this regard, the study of Engel, Claessens and Watts [10] suggests that children from low-income families usually start school behind their peers in both math and reading. In addition, Reardon [11] argues that just as the family income has become more predictive of children's academic achievement, so have educational attainment and cognitive skills become more predictive of adults' incomes. As the children of the rich do better in school, and those who do better in school are more likely to become wealthy, there is a risk of producing a more unequal and economically polarized society.

At the same time, the study carried out by Duncan and Murnane [12] analyzes the increasing residential segregation by income. One consequence is that children from low-income families are much more likely to have

classmates with poor achievement and behavioral problems than children from better-off families. In this respect, a piece of research conducted by Umut Dur Scott Duke Kominers Parag A. Pathak Tayfun Sönmez (2013) in the United States shows that the order of precedence not only has quantitative impacts almost as large as the changes in neighborhood priority, but also boosts the achievement of distributional goals.

In Mexico, Vera, González and Hernández [14] recognize that the academic achievement of disadvantaged children is threatened by the lack of opportunities in terms of food, clothing and education, as well as the scarce family support and encouragement they receive as regards school. At the same time, Yurén and de la Cruz [15], point out that school culture deteriorates because vulnerability is naturalized (as if heredity) and therefore, family members are debased, which in turn results in parents' low expectations as regards school education and low commitment to their children's learning as well as their own.

In Chile, Hernández and Raczyński [16] emphasize that educational segregation would not only respond to a subsidy system in which subsidized private schools select between the students that apply, but also to the selection strategies and guidelines that families unfold, according to their position within the social structure and their cultural capital.

In this regard, in Mexico, Torres Corona's [17] study on the school choice of indigenous groups recognizes that in the case of small-scale trader parents with low schooling levels (church followers or *iglesistas* and National Torch Movement followers or *antorchistas*), the material and flexibility reasons played a crucial role in their explanations; whereas those with a greater educational trajectory emphasized training and quality of service as determining factors in their choice based on their personal experience.

The studies by Tellado and Sava [18] in Spain, and Catalano and Catalano [19] in Romania, recognize that family participation in the classroom makes learning more meaningful for children because they learn in relation to the members of the family. However, another group of studies demonstrates the nuances and differences between the forms of participation of families at schools.

In this respect, the study carried out in the Czech Republic by Pecháková, Kabešová, Kuzdasová, Vítková [20] shows that most often parents have confidence in teachers, and therefore, probably do not consider it necessary to interfere with school activities.

The study conducted by Pérez Diaz, Rodríguez and Fernández [21] shows that homes equipped with a plethora

¹ Romania, Czech Republic, Canada, Chile (2) and Sweden.

of educational resources (computers, television, daily or very frequent use of Messenger and game consoles) exhibit direct parent involvement in children's education, i.e. they send their children to extracurricular activities, ask for lessons received and read with their children aloud.

For its part, the study by Bernad and Llevot [22] on families belonging to minorities in Spain, acknowledges that there are socio-economic barriers, such as the precarious living conditions of some families or the difficulty of reconciling working and school hours, as well as communication barriers that try to be overcome by different means, such as the use of other languages (French or English) or translators (other families or their own children) or the use of simple language structures and vocabulary and pictograms in written communication [22]-[23].

In Argentina, the study carried out by Villa [24] indicates that education is a strategy aimed at reproducing the different high and/or low fractions of the societal sphere. Complementing this contribution, the study of Fuentes [25] on upper-class families points out that morality refers to a set of conceptions that classify actions, which include economic, social and cultural capital that is invested and produced during secondary school. It is an investment that (re)produces a symbolic capital, i.e. the moral capital.

Even in the upper classes, Ziegler [26] notes differences between those that attend private schools vs. state schools. The families that opt for private institutions are oriented towards the pursuit of a satisfactory homogeneity. The selectivity and social homogeneity of these schools provide a scenario for socialization that guarantees the adjustment between the principles sustained by the schools and family idiosyncrasies. Contrariwise, the families that select the state school have a more heterogeneous and mobile origin. Here, it is the institution that plans to train the elites and receives among its pupils, students from varied social classes.

On the basis of the acknowledgement of socio-economic differences and their differential impact on the academic success of students, as well as the ability of families to participate in their children's schooling, Carelli [27] notes that this acknowledgement has led to the acceptance and even incentive on the part of the State to attend each social sector in a direct, almost mechanical, way according to the role of their parents and groups of belonging in the social structure.

As opposed to these approaches, certain authors develop a set of arguments that differ from previous studies in two main aspects.

First, they confuse diversity with fragmentation. Diversity is not synonymous with fragmentation in so far as the latter implies that only a certain schooling proposal is correct, and all others that differ, to a greater or lesser extent, result in statements such as "poor schools for poor people," "first and second-class schools," and the like. Thinking in terms of diversity allows the schooling processes to be tailored according to each social and educational trajectory. This enables the idea of a "sovereign school," which recognizes that each school has

a general mandate according to the macro educational level, but also a self-imposed mandate for which it was created in a certain time and place, and provides answers to territorial needs and specific socio-educational trajectories.

Second, they assume that the rich are always the ones who choose and the poor should accept what they get. The concept of cultural relevance acquires in this sense a capital significance to understand that this is not the case. Differences in educational institutions are far from being the product of "something that went wrong" in the original modernization plan of the school, but rather a consequence of varied personal characteristics and needs, which, in turn, are influenced by their social and cultural context. Particularly, it is a diversity defined from the students' point of view and, on the basis of such recognition, certain generic categories from which previous knowledge comes from may be established [28].

In fact, Cafiero's study [29] in Argentina shows that popular class parents build and carry out a plurality of responses and strategies to face the inequality perceived in the educational system. For example, school or shift changes, organization to take children to more highly regarded though far-off schools, search of school support activities or avoidance of schools where situations of aggression or discrimination are known to have occurred show that popular class families have an active and committed attitude towards their children's school.

In this second line of research, Stefanski, Valli and Jacobson [30] in the United States and Feito Alonso [31] in Spain point out that in contrast to the simple family involvement versus family engagement dichotomy, their findings suggest eight distinct ways in which family roles were envisioned and enacted. It is in this sense that Lawson, Alameda-Lawson, Lawson, Briar-Lawson and Wilcox [32] point out that parent and family interventions developed in and for urban schools and their "home neighborhoods" are not automatically transportable or applied to rural school communities. In line with these contributions, the study conducted by Bennett, Lutz, Jayaram [33] point that the role of schools in class gaps in activity participation is not solely one of reducing class inequality; for, schools differ in the kinds of structured activities they offer.

In this sense, some studies demonstrate the different strategies deployed to strengthen the link through open house days and group meetings at different times during the school year, with family participation, tutoring and schedule organization to facilitate the meetings [34]-[35], as well as adherence to a democratization process of the institution that allows families and the community to participate in the construction of a common project [36].

In this context, Martínez Pérez [37] in Spain has observed that each school is unique and singular. This singularity has shown that the relationships established in each educational institution, understood from various perspectives and positions, are diverse and particular, with common but also different mechanisms and strategies. For this reason, Cerletti [38] in Argentina reinforces the importance of making room for community characteristics

and needs at school to avoid unifying what is different.

In the United States, Simon and Johnson [39] argue that “policymakers might increase support and distribute responsibilities among district and schoolbased personnel so that principals could be complemented by the services of a district-level partnership office that helps schools develop relationships with community-based organizations, such as healthcare agencies and extracurricular programs.”

This is the case of the strategy analyzed by Llevot Calvet and Bernad Caveró [40] in Spain, who analyze an experience conducted in schools attended by minority groups (gypsies), where members of their own community were added to the classrooms as mediators and school promoters. This strategy demonstrates that it is possible to contribute to school education from different places, without the need to substitute expert knowledge, such as that of the teacher, but to enrich it with relevant contributions from the community itself.

Families and Schools: Evidence in Argentina

At present, the educational community is defined as a space of belonging for youths that are outside the school [41] and points out to the need of deploying voluntary activities and solidarity projects that foster community promotion. Apart from families, students, teachers and auxiliary workers, school cooperatives and other organizations linked to the school are included. It is interesting to note that members of the educational community begin to be referred as "actors" and the diversity of socio-territorial anchorages is recognized, as well as an idea of participation that favors the teaching and learning processes.

As Alonso poses [42], consensus does not build community; in any case, it contributes to solve specific disagreements. The idea of community, based on a certain social homogeneity, legitimizes an order and the mechanisms of democratic participation, but eliminates heterogeneity, which neutralizes centrifugal or dissenting forces. Community is rather constituted as an organized diversity where pluralities, heterogeneity, order and disorder co-exist giving rise to a certain balance that allows that community to evolve. Frigerio, Poggi and Tiramonti [43] point out that conflict is inherent to each and every school, being part of its own dynamics. Hence, on the basis of the allocation of resources, schools’ capacity to satisfy interests and the ways in which the differences have historically been settled, the headmasters will have more or less possibilities of generating a climate of cooperation towards the fulfillment of the school-society contract. In this context, Santos Guerra [44] recognizes that a headmaster’s primary dilemma is between their obligation to exercise control and their interest in eliciting participation.

In this respect, it should be noted that school is not isolated. On the contrary, many of its activities are directly linked to those of other community actors. The headmaster is in this case a builder of networks [45] that enable the link between school and the actors that build it daily, such as teachers, students and parents. **Table III** shows the characteristics acquired by the participation processes according to state and private educational managements:

Table III. Characteristics of institutional participation by educational management sector

	Dimensions	State schools	Private schools
Relationship with parents	Participation in school decisions through institutional agreements	44%	0
	Call on any issue	19%	41%
	Information given about all of the activities developed (lectures, workshops)	19%	17%
	Personal and informal relationship (spontaneous meetings)	6%	25%
	School is considered the sole responsible for children’s education (some interviewees did not reply)	6%	17%
	Difficult relationship/not willing to listen/friends of students	6%	0
	Total	100	100%
Conflict management	Intervention of all the institutional actors (Consultative Council meetings with the Institutional Academic Council and the Council of Coexistence, made up by students)	82%	0
	Resolution through strengthening of relationships	12%	0
	Protocol	6%	0
	Through conversations with the person involved, if behavior is not modified, disciplinary measures/admonitions are applied	0	100%
	Total	100%	100%

Source: Compiled by author based on interviews conducted between 2011 and 2014.

As regards the relationship between the school actors and families, there is a trend that would indicate that the state management sector develops greater processes of participation than their private counterparts, given that families and teachers are key players in decision-making and agreement development:

"Sometimes you need to step aside and let the teacher's leading role to grow; the teacher figure should be important, as well as that of the student, who may be doing well on a subject, or wins a tournament, whose trophy they bring to school, that is, continuously generating different spaces for them to be creative, take center stage, etc... This is how school identification is generated, feeling it as one's own." **(Headmaster of state secondary school)**

"As regards parents, we always invite them to show them how the school works and how we organize after-school subjects, because the youngsters have to go home and then back to school. The school is permanently open." **(Headmaster of state secondary school)**

It seems that in private educational management, families would not play a fundamental role in the decision-making processes, which are probably handled by the organization leadership (headmasters, owners or the foundation). Regular meetings with teachers (90%) to inform decisions already made or to update some kind of information regarding curricular and institutional issues are seen as a distinctive feature. On the other hand, the main characteristic of the relationship with parents relates to their calling on any behavioral problem of their children (41%). The links are also developed individually, and to a lesser extent (25%), between each family and the headmaster according to specific queries of these families:

"Conceptually, its object and creation [the Council of Coexistence] are perfectly clear, but its deployment does not seem to be operationally feasible. In practice, it is difficult to develop, since the Council hinders and puts off the resolution of minor daily issues while awaiting notification of Council meeting. For our part, it is constituted for the application of severe disciplinary measures or the treatment of serious situations. Sincerely, it has never been necessary to call a meeting." **(Headmaster of private secondary school)**

"The meeting where we give the school report is an occasion to talk about these things [with the family]. Especially, if the student wants to stay in the school, they should align with school norms and change their behavior to receive the crumbs of goodness that can be given in a school like this. And if not, they will have to decide what to do outside of school, because I have to watch over the other students, since it is not only one student that is affected but the whole lot." **(Headmaster of private secondary school)**

For its part, the question of conflict is a constant feature when the managerial function is analyzed. Educational institutions have adopted different positions as regards constituent expressions of human life, such as conflict, which has been and will always be present in social ties. It is not about dissimilar experiences generated by changes of the time and updated general guidelines. Contrasts are expressed even during the same periods, dissimilar

situations account for radically different conceptions that generate different conditions for the others, for that "other" that frequently belongs to a younger generation or has a lower educational trajectory, and before whom coexistence does not place us in a place of symmetry. These various ways of positioning, generate a space in which the other is visualized and received in a specific manner. The ways of looking at them, i.e., of conceiving them, opens certain doors and closes others [46]. In this regard, state and private educational management practices have quite distinct positions.

According to **Table 3**, and as regards state school headmasters, there is an important level of recognition of conflicts and the need to gather different voices and positions to achieve a reconciling synthesis to overcome the conflict situation. It is an educational management practice where, according to Ball [47], the existence of competing interests and ideologies in the school is recognized, and therefore, allowed to participate into the formal discussion and decision-making processes. That is, conflict is recognized as an inherent feature of institutional functioning, manifesting itself in the coexistence of different positions:

"There are always conflicts at school, they can be between students, between students and teachers, and between adults ... there are all kinds of conflicts. When something happens, the first thing we do is meeting with everyone involved, so that everybody can state their point of view. And after everyone has said what they had to say, we ask: How do we solve it? Because we have to live side by side with each other, we have no other choice. Then we either iron out the differences or agree to some minimal norms, a compromise, and we do it in writing." **(Headship of state secondary school)**

"That presence-based pedagogy is formative of youths since we provide spaces of contact with the students. There is an overlapping of those worlds which occurs at school but we have to understand that for them the concept of violence and justice is absolutely different from ours. So, the question is how we can develop, build citizenship with students that belong to worlds where the concepts of freedom, justice, etc. have another value, totally different from ours." **(Headmaster of state school)**

On the other hand, as regards private school headmasters, conflict relates to behavioral problems or those practices that deviate from the norm, from the establishment. In these practices, there are rules according to which students' behaviors and learning are measured against their degree of deviation. Hence, the functionalist idea of "modeling" and disciplinary measures as a solution that reinforces the trajectories and pre-established behaviors:

"Always and in principle, through dialogue, then, the Discipline Book is signed, and depending on the misconduct, they may be admonished, or eventually suspended depending on the seriousness of the case." **(Headmaster of private school)**

"I spoke personally to each and every student and made a list of those who considered themselves responsible, and on the basis of such knowledge, I took the necessary

measures." (Headmaster of private school)

"And we must practice what we preach, taking each student as a unique human being, towards whom we have the enormous responsibility but also the incredible privilege of positively marking for the rest of their lives."

(Headmaster of private school)

In this way, it is possible to recognize two main and different management styles between state private schools as regards conflict management. On the one hand, the actions carried out in private schools are aimed at complying with procedures and protocols that respond to a bureaucratic way of managing conflict that denotes an administrative type of management [47]. The headmaster would be a chief executive that responds to a senior management and decision-making team, namely the school's owners or foundation.

On the other hand, state schools' attitude recognizes the complexity and diversity that characterizes school, it does not regard actions out of compliance but rather considers the singularities of the situation through a collectively constructed response; it does not pretend to homogenize, but to create the necessary conditions for differences to find their place.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

First, it is possible to contribute to scholar education from different places, without the need to substitute expert knowledge, such as that of the teacher, but to enrich it with relevant contributions from the community itself. The relationships established in each educational institution, understood from various perspectives and positions, are diverse and particular, with common but also different mechanisms and strategies. Apart from families, students, teachers and auxiliary workers, school cooperatives and other organizations linked to the school are included.

Second, families can remain linked to schools through the active participation of their children in the development of the institution. Recognizing the diverse socio-cultural and working conditions of families, it is possible to deploy other family-school link strategies. The relationship between schools and families is not just a matter of communication or inviting parents to share specific events or meetings. Link strengthening strategies are more complex; they must allow families to feel represented through the inclusion of their children in the various instances of participation in daily school life. Such instances may include meetings of the Consultative Council, the Institutional Academic Council, and the Coexistence Council. Thus, thinking of the strengthening of the family-school bond is not only a matter of distance between parents and institutions, but a political issue that questions the student's role in the life of a school that is defining and carrying out their training as a citizen.

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