Constructing parental involvement in school: Examples from an action research project using web-based tools

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Introduction

Classic ecological models of human development have stressed the importance of strong connections between school and family micro-systems as a protective factor for children's development and educational trajectories (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Early anthropological research in the United States examined this interconnection micro-ethnographically, as a question of continuity/discontinuity between the interactional and communicative patterns of children in their families and communities and in school (reviewed in Cazden, 1980; Guthrie, 1983; Mehan, 1984). Sociological research in Europe, drawing from Bourdieu's general framework (1994), re-framed these cultural discontinuities more broadly in terms of symbolic, ideological and cultural overlaps between families and schools as distinct social fields (Lahire, 1998, 2007). Generally speaking, these research traditions have placed their analytic focus on ethnic minority and lower-social class students in an attempt to understand (and ameliorate) historical socioeducational inequalities among students in industrialized democratic educational systems.

In contrast, more recently, within the international research literature there has been a strong interest in understanding school-family dynamics and parental educational strategies within middle-class ('mainstream') families and communities (reviewed in Nogueira, 2010) - that is, the population segment that has a historically productive relationship with school and comparatively successful socioeducational trajectories. In this latter case, the focus has not been on understanding those processes leading to educational disadvantage but rather on the construction of educational privilege (e.g. Lareau, 1987; McGhee Hassrick and Schneider, 2009) through parental strategies, the structuration of children's activities and involvement in schooling. In relation to previous work this analytical re-focus has also favored two conceptual developments. On one hand, it addresses the critique made to micro-ethnographic work for restricting the analysis of educational inequalities and school-family (dis)continuities to communicative patterns (e.g. Ogbu, 1981, 1982). Recent comparative studies focused on families with different socio-economic and cultural characteristics incorporate parental networks, parental and school ideologies, formal and informal spaces of collaboration, etc. as elements that fit into the school-family relational equation. On the other hand, they have empirically brought to life –through ethnographically detailed analysis- the notion of "cultural capital" as a structuring force in the constitution of school-family relationships and student's educational trajectories.

In short, a number of research traditions converge in understanding school-family relationships around school as a contributing factor to educational success and as an element which plays a role in the production of socioeducational opportunities and inequalities. Further, the topic is aligned with a practical and policy issue for school administrators, teachers, communities and families centered focused on establishing and sustaining a productive relationship between the different social actors who play a role in children's education. Western countries with a stronger and more prolonged tradition of public comprehensive and democratically organized education have established practices as to how these dynamics should be addressed -which is not to say these are uncontested or unproblematic. However, in the Spanish case, school-family-community relationships are still contested and unresolved issues (Vila, 1998; Vila and Casares, 2009). A relatively short history of democratically organized public/state education and changing economic and policy regulations around education complicate establishing a consensus around how teachers and parents, schools and communities should communicate and interact with each other. Also, parents across the socio-economic and cultural spectrum face increasing challenges in the daily management of their relationship and communication with school as work-schedules and the spatial complexities of urban life (Poveda et al; 2006, Vila, 1998), or linguistic and cultural differences in the case of immigrant and ethnic minority parents (Moscoso, 2009), create obstacles to sustain this relationship. In other words, while family-school continuities are consistently construed as a factor that has an impact on children's education and development, in the Spanish case, this move also involves actively constructing, promoting and constraining particular versions of what constitutes parental involvement (cf. Lewis and Forman, 2002) and of being a "school parent". Further, this construction takes place in a context where the historical precedents of how this relationship is established may be of little practical use. Consequently the investigation of this topic is an especially good occasion to foreground the fact that parents are also educational actors who are transformed during the process of their offspring's schooling. In situations where this process is especially intense or involves more change on the part of parents we might even consider it a process where their parental subjectivities are reconfigured (cf. Jociles and Charro, 2008).

In this context, during the 2010-11 school-year we began a research project (which will be completed in the 2011-12 school-year) focused on the dynamics of parent-teacher collaboration and communication during the pre-school years of the Spanish educational system (when children are between 3-6 years of age). The project was framed as an action-based research project in which a shared concern between the teacher in a pre-school classroom and the parents in the class on finding new ways to foster communication between the teacher and parents, increase parental involvement in classroom activities and establishing new forms or collaboration -in a way that was compatible with the time and material constraints that most parents in the class faced- was responded to with the creation of a classroom blog in which the teacher, the students and the parents could participate. This blog was initially created by a parent in the class -who also ethnographically documented the process- with standard open-access tools and was the catalyst of new forms of parental involvement, children's literacy practices and activities in the classroom. Thus, the project was also conceived to help asses the role that ready-made, accessible technological solutions may play in transforming communication between teachers, parents and students and parental involvement in a context where the "ITC aspect" of Spanish education is often seen as having much room for "improvement" (Sigalés, Mominó, Meneses, & Badia, 2008) despite the generalized access to internet and technology in Spain (Fundación Telefónica, 2011). Nonetheless, our focus will not be on the affordances of particular technological solutions but rather on the social dynamics that emerge around them. In this paper, we will focus on two aspects of these dynamics: (a) the parental identities and forms of interaction and participation that emerge in the blog, especially around the theme of early literacy

education and media consumption; (b) the variety of ideologies and expectations that emerge among parents and the teacher around this collaborative context.

Methodology and research context

The study involves participant observation in class meetings, interactions between parents in informal spaces, virtual observations of the blog activity and interviews with parents and the teacher in the classroom. The larger part of the data collection process (formal and informal observations, documentation and maintenance of the blog, participation in school events, etc.) rests on the first author of the paper in his dual role of school parent and researcher. Supplementary interviews, analysis of virtual activity and other secondary observations are being conducted by the second and third authors of the paper as external researchers to the school site.

The research site for this study is a public school located in the campus of a large Spanish research-oriented public University located in the outskirts of Madrid - which we will call El Prado (pseudonym). The school is well-known for its commitment to innovative educational practices and strong parental involvement. It caters a relatively socio-economically, culturally and ethnically homogenous population largely composed of academic and non-academic employees and students of the University and some residents from surrounding areas. Thus, what we are documenting in this study sheds light on the dynamics of school-family collaboration, the role played by certain simple and accessible technological solutions and the parental and educational ideologies that sustain these processes, yet, there is indeed a major question in relation to the generalizability of our findings and of how parent-teacher collaboration dynamics unfold in schools immersed in other socio-economic, cultural and geographical realities (which are, in fact, very different in most public schools of the city of Madrid).

Pablo's classroom blog: History and general context

The idea of opening a classroom blog emerged in a general teacher-class parent meeting in October 2010. Pablo (pseudonym), the classroom teacher, suggested that as a group they should find a way of communicating electronically, perhaps via e-mail or something similar, to reduce the amount of paperwork and information that circulated among the children in paper notes, memos, etc. During this meeting this idea was positively received but was not developed any further. After the meeting, Javier (first author of the paper, classroom parent and a professional in the area of technology and education), approached the teacher and volunteered opening a classroom blog in an open-access platform. Pablo agreed to this idea although he was not familiarized with what this solution could offer or what type of involvement and commitment on his part it would require. Just over a week later the platform was opened and a first post by Javier was published in the blog. Access to the blog is restricted to classroom parents and requires signing-up in the web-platform. Information on how to sign-up was posted on the notice board of the classroom entrance. The general welcome post published by Javier stated:

> **Extract 1: *Pablo's classroom* – First Post (22 October 2010, translated from Spanish)**
> Autumn
> Autumn is here and with it the opportunity to learn many things. You will start receiving information about the activities that we will organize at school for the early years, but for now you can collaborate providing materials (fruits of the season, photographs, books, etc.) to start working in the classroom.

The first few posts were added by Javier and his daughter. These first interventions were created to model and illustrate how the different members of the blog could participate – i.e.

Extract 1 is 'voiced' as coming from the teacher, Javier's daughter illustrated children's possible role and Javier himself presented what parents could do with the blog. After this opening another parent began to participate, and the teacher did not post any comments until close to a month after the blog was opened. Pablo's first reaction was somewhat hesitant, he was initially concerned that managing the blog would consume much of his classroom preparation time or spill-over into his family time at a moment when he had other demands at home (two young children). However, by the end of November 2010 Pablo became the main contributor to the blog and now uses the platform to inform regularly about classroom activities, upcoming field-trips and other practical issues concerning life in the classroom and has continued to play this leading role since then – by apparently finding sufficient time to contribute to the blog during classroom breaks, preparation time in school and occasional contributions during the evenings from home. In fact, in the spring of 2011 when a second general classroom meeting was being planned, Pablo approached Javier to discuss possible ways of increasing parental involvement in the blog and revamping its role in the classroom community.

The blog is structured around categories (introduce collaboratively by Javier and Pablo as blog administrators) and is open to the teacher, parents and children of the class. Children have a specific category and their interventions, as a result of an agreed convention in the classroom, are usually in capital letters – thus indexing easily authorship of the text. In February 2011 a 'spin-off' public blog was created attached to the classroom blog centered on children's literature. The focus of this blog was to exchange recommendations and books between all teachers, children and parents in the early years program of the school (3-6 years of age). As a summary of the blogs activity, as of October 2012, the blog has published 225 entries (posts and comments), works with 7 categories and 28 tags, has 21 subscribers (out of a classroom of 25 children) and has received close to 6500 visits. In short, it is a visible component of classroom life and is explicitly described by parents in informal conversations and classroom meetings as an important tool in the management of teacher-parent communication and school-family relations.

Participation and interaction in the classroom blog

An analysis of the content and topic development of the classroom blog suggests a transformation in the functions and place of the blog in school-parent relationships. The initial impetus was, perhaps naively, to facilitate daily communication on logistical matters (e.g. field-trips, upcoming school events, lice infestations, etc.) that were inefficiently distributed through the children with paper notes and memos. However, soon this use expanded to include a broader chronicle of classroom life and school activities (e.g. topics discussed during morning assemblies, on-going classroom projects, etc.). Often, these posts were introduced by Pablo during the school day, thus providing parents' (many of which have activated the e-mail notification option when the blog is updated) with information about their children's school-day even before they pick up their children from school. This availability leads to a basic form of engagement with the blog that is construed as "active" but is basically centered on reading posts and commenting them among family members or following through the posted suggestions with their children:

> **Extract 2: Interview with Dora (classroom mother, translated from Spanish)**
> Interviewer: How do you usually participate in the blog?
>
> Dora: We, really are usually passive, we read, we read what's there and then what we do is work with what we read, if the teacher posts something (...) my husband comes and says "they've written in the blog" [earlier she explained her husband as activated the e-mail alert option in his mobile phone], so I go home, take the computer, go in, take a look at it: so

dinosaurs, and with this we start to work, we need to get documents, we need to prepare photographs, we need to prepare this and that (...)

However, parents also began to engage in a number of conversations around recommendations in the area of children's literature, family activities during the weekend and suggestions in relation to other media products. In fact, practices around children's literature and literacy slowly began to emerge as the dominant themes and concerns of parents in the blog – as illustrated by the fact that a spin-off blog was created solely devoted to this topic. Interestingly, this focus developed (and continues to develop) despite the fact that the early years team is explicitly committed to avoid developing a pre-school curriculum focused on an early structured introduction to reading and writing (e.g. phonics-based methods) or on focusing on literacy in detriment of other "languages" (e.g. body language, visual and plastic arts, music, etc.). From our perspective, the development of this concern is a manifestation of the socio-cultural, ideological and intellectual climate that is perceived to be dominant among classroom parents and the community in which the school is inserted. Further, as the following post suggests, this selective focus is not simply the product of an implicit / natural bias, since parents make explicit a series of oppositions and decisions that illustrate their role as active agents in the production of certain cultural and aesthetic 'distinctions' (cf. Bourdieu, 1994).

Extract 3: Pablo's classroom – Movie recommendation by parent (20 September 2011, translated from Spanish)

Hi all, happy return of the summer. I would like to recommend a movie that is playing now in theatres: *The secret world of Arrietty.* It's from the prestigious Studio Ghibli, in Japan; Those of you who have seen kids movies from them (Totoro, Ponyo) already know the style, with a much slower pace than Hollywood productions and with no "good" and "evil" characters. To give you an idea, it is more like the first part of Pixar's *Wall-E* or Up, before all the commotions starts. Many of you may find it boring, actually its an issue of taste.

If you are interested, some time ago I made a <u>table</u> [active link inserted] with the movies from this studio, indicating approximate ages for each one. Beware, some are very strong and are only suitable for older children or even adults, don't be misguided just because it's an animation movie.

This effort to provide media and literature products that move beyond mass-consumption also spills over to the teacher's interventions. In his report of classroom activities, Pablo highlights parental initiatives that move beyond wide-spread conventions among Spanish children and families (such as bringing candies to share during a child's birthday):

Extract 4: Pablo's classroom – Extract of post by the teacher (6 February 2011, translated from Spanish)

ON FRIDAY, DORA (MARIO LOPEZ'S MOM) AND FRANCISCA (OLIVER'S MOM) GAVE US A DIFFERENT BIRTHDAY PARTY: THEY BROUGHT TO THE CLASSROOM STORIES OF CASTLES AND EVEN THE COMPLETE CASTLE, IN ADDITION TO A 'LITTLE BOOK' FOR EVERY BOY AND GIRL IN CLASS (WRITTEN IN CAPITAL LETTERS, SO WE CAN CONTINUE EXPLORE READING, EACH AT THEIR OWN PACE) AND A BOOKLET WITH LETTERS THAT WE WILL USE IN THE CLASSROOM. THANKS TO BOTH MOMS. (...)

In short, the blog has not only served as a mere information channel from the school to the parents but has emerged as space where new forms of dialogue and communication between the teacher and the parents have emerged. Further, as parental interests and concerns are manifested, particular forms of parental engagement inside and outside school are presented, modeled and implicitly promoted. These forms of engagement rest on values

and interests which are illustrative of the socio-cultural and socio-economic characteristics of many of the families in the school - something we will return to in the conclusions. They also rest on a particular definition of parental involvement in school and of how teacher-parent collaboration should operate. This is presented as an issue that has historically been addressed in particular ways by this school.

Socioeducational ideologies on parental participation in school

As indicated above, the school presents itself as an institution committed to educational innovation and active participation by all members of the educational community. This portrait is seen as part of the schools foundational principles and history as a school that was founded alongside a modern public university and caters a highly educated and ideologically progressive population. This account is produced across participants in a way in which pedagogical choices and parent's backgrounds are intimately intertwined, even by the classroom teacher.

> **Extract 5: Interview with Pablo (classroom teacher, translated from Spanish)**
>
> Pablo: So for example, working with projects, working the relationship with families, that children have initiative, that they are the ones who propose, for example, the dinosaurs project is their idea (...) because the important thing in the early years is not what you learn but how you learn it (...)
>
> Inter: (...) so what you are doing here, you don't think you could do in any of the other schools where (you have worked)?-
>
> Pablo: -Yes, yes, I have but then it took much more effort, I mean, developing a project in a school that hardly has a budget and everything was underfunded was much more complicated, and then the cultural level, so imagine in the Gitano neighborhood, there (...) the neighborhood was built out of prefabs and shanty houses (...) so the cultural level was very low so we basically worked habits (...)

In this context, parents have elaborate ideas about how the relationship with the school should be articulated. There is some variability in these discourses and the strongest views are held by parents who have 'academic' backgrounds and a strong network of connections to the school -i.e. because the have several children in the school, because they are also involved in the school parental association, etc.- (McGhee Hassrick and Schneider, 2009). In this case, parents construe themselves as actors capable of configuring the terms of teacher-parent collaboration in the school:

> **Extract 6: Interview with Alicia and David (classroom parents, translated from Spanish)**
>
> (...) I think parents here participate a lot, in general all of them, the participation level is very high, in class meetings practically all 100% of parents go to class meetings, (fathers and mothers), both. When we have had new teachers, for example, there was a teacher last year at school who did not expect this, she didn't have enough chairs... and we parents in these meetings ask about what they are going to do, we have a structure in this school where there are lots of field-trips, we work with projects, they don't have home-work, they don't have textbooks, we expect that teachers tell us what themes they are going to work on, how we can collaborate, we expect going to the school garden, to the culinary workshops, we expect teachers to be open to ideas we might have and we practically take all this for granted. When teachers from somewhere else arrive at the school, they are a bit shocked because they feel invaded, teachers who have been here all their lives, the school has a well defined style, they let us in but know how to 'contain' us (...)

In their discourses both parents and the teacher acknowledge that these dynamics, in part, rest on the 'favorable' socio-economic and cultural background of the great majority of families in the school. While *El Prado* is a public school governed by the same policies and admission procedures as the rest of public schools in Madrid, it is located in an area of the city and serves a school population with very few immigrant families, children who are Spanish as second-language students or families facing economic hardship. Our participants construe these circumstances as an advantage and see the relative socio-cultural homogeneity of the school as an element that facilitates the development of the school's pedagogical program and the forms of family-school collaboration presented above. However, this scenario is not simply or only the result of socio-economic and cultural circumstances. Parents are aware that it also involves certain ideological dispositions which are not shared and followed through by all parents with similar socio-economic status. For example, in a conversational interview with Javier and his partner on the educational decisions they made in relation to their daughter's education, school choice emerges as a controversial topic among families in their own condominium complex:

> **Extract 7: Interview conversation with Javier and Reyes (classroom parents, translated from Spanish)**
>
> Javier: Among neighbors there is variability in schools, there are schools, they don't only take them to the neighborhood schools, they send them to many types of schools.
>
> Reyes: yes, so what?
>
> Javier: for example, when you go down (to the courtyard), with neighbors, for example you talk about the things kids do in schools, about activities and in conversations the blog might come up and so-
>
> Reyes: -No, I don't talk much about schools with my neighbors (...) because they might go and blurt "I don't send them to a public school because it is full of immigrants" (...) you know what its like, every time the issue of schools comes up we end up...

In short, parents in the school have specified a form of participation and involvement in school activities that is construed as distinctive from conventional practices in public schools of the region. This form of parental engagement rests on the pedagogical tradition of the school and is facilitated -or perhaps made possible- by the socio-cultural background and ideological commitments of the majority of parents in the school. Also, this definition of parental roles emerges as a co-construction between parents and the educational institution.

Conclusions

Our analysis of activity around the classroom blog and the socio-educational ideologies that sustain participation in the school under study show how parents are also defined as educational subjects, in the sense that their parental practices and (probably) educational beliefs are re-configured through their children schooling. The form of parental engagement in school that emerges in this context must be understood as a co-construction between parents and the school. In a somewhat iterative process, over more than three decades of existence, the school has developed a distinctive pedagogical program; incoming families are aware of this program, expect it when they choose this school for their children, and as school parents are actively socialized into it through collaboration with the school. In turn, school parents "monitor" new teachers in the school and push for established pedagogical practices to be incorporated by recently arrived teachers in the school (such as Pablo, who has started his second appointment in the school two school-years ago). Further, and perhaps more importantly, this form of parental experience is performatively produced

(Nayak and Kehily, 2006; Ruitenberg, 2007). Parents display and enact through their discourses, forms of engagement in school and their activity in the blog (which provides a new terrain for these displays with its own particular set of affordances and empirical qualities) specific ways of being a "school parent". Yet, these forms of being a "school parent" are made possible and regulated by practices and discourses emanating from the educational institution itself and wider socio-educational ideologies which are intimately tied to the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the families that dominate school life.

As we have seen there is variability in the forms of participation in the blog, as well as variability in parental discourses and their engagement in school (less explored in this paper due to space constraints) but, overall, these elements present a scenario where social-class and the display of a particular form of middle-class educational advantage (cf. Foley, 2010). Indeed, the site under study is conditioned by a number of particularities which are not shared by many public / stare-run schools in Madrid and, thus, while what we have documented sheds light on the dynamics of school-family collaboration, there is a major question in relation to the generalizability of our findings. Consequently, in line with previous comparative work (Lareau, 1987; McGhee Hassrick and Schneider, 2009; Lewis and Forman, 2002), future work should extend the study of the dynamics of teacher-parent communication and collaboration to public schools located in working-class and ethnically more diverse districts of the city of Madrid (Spain), where a tradition of intense educational innovation and family-school collaboration does not exist but there might be a disposition to make use of new forms of communication and exchange.

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