

## Assessing parents' satisfaction with their parental role for a more effective partnerships between families and schools

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This study is framed within the field of family education family-school-community partnerships considering ways by which schools might help parents to be better involved in their children's education; one of this ways is performing parenting programmes within the school in areas of interest for parents. The objective is to identify parents' educational needs regarding their role with small children to help them to answer those needs by means of a parenting programme. Accordingly, the study has been organized in two phases: the first one is devoted to assess and identify parental needs and the second one to describe and evaluate a parenting programme. Both qualitative and quantitative procedures to gather information have been used: parents' questionnaires, group dynamics with parents and semi-structured interviews. The sample is composed of 54 Spanish rural and urban parents with small children. Results in the assessment phase indicate that although most parents are satisfied with their parental role, many have doubts about how to solve problems and help their children to control their behaviour better. The positive results of the parenting programme in the second phase point out the convenience to design, perform and evaluate educational strategies for empowering parents while upbringing their children.

### Introduction

One of the most relevant perspectives to study family-school-community partnerships comes from the Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence proposed by Epstein (Simon and Epstein, 2001, 2003; Deslandes, 2001), which backs that children have greater school success when their homes, schools, and communities work in partnership to support student's learning.

According to Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, and Simon (1997), family-school-community partnerships can be analysed considering several ways by which the school helps parents to be better involved in their children's education; one of this ways is to perform parenting programmes within the school in areas of interest for parents.

A recent research on parenting strategies in Spain carried out by Martínez-González, Pérez-Herrero and Álvarez-Blanco (2006) shows that 43.6% of the parents in a sample of 124 admit it is difficult for them to understand their children's behaviour, especially that of teenagers. At this evolutive stage an increasing number of secondary school students show school absenteeism, misbehaviour within the school and academic failure (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams and Dalicandro, 1998; Chen and Kaplan, 2003; EFE, 2005), which makes many parents feel guilty and inadequate because they suffer the pressure of social expectations to raise children (Martínez-González, 1998). Many of them doubt about what to do to stimulate their children's cooperation both at home and at the school, because the parental methods of the past do not work exactly the same today; consequently, many parents feel they have lost key models for raising children.

When children misbehave in the classroom, teachers usually inform parents and ask them to do something about it. Often, however, parents do not know what to do. This discomfort may prevent many parents from

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contacting the school or the teachers, especially when parents perceive the educators as not being helpful. This lack of communication may raise tension between parents and teachers, making it more likely that each side will blame the other for the child's misbehaviour.

To offset these negative outcomes, schools might help parents enhance their parenting skills, thus helping them feel more competent and become more effective. These ideas are framed within the Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1990, 1997; Symeou, 2007), which refers to the quality and depth of relationships between people in a family or in a community.

This form of capital is created by the relationships among people, which assist personal development as well as access to social resources. Social capital in the family is found in the relationship between children and parents (and other family members) and the resources that are generated towards the child's wellbeing. This gives children access to the adult's human capital (education and personal resources) and depends on both the parents' participation and the attention they give to the child.

Parental education as resource of social capital for children constitutes an unfulfilled subject in the Spanish society and educational system, from which the education of individuals is articulated in multiple phases and for the development of multiple functions, but which does not consider the necessary education to perform one of the most complex and with more social responsibility role: to be a parent, that is, to be an educator of children for life.

Parental education can be developed in a diversity of contexts and with different formats, but it seems more effective when it is performed within the schools through programmes which incorporate an active and participative methodology (Bartau, Maganto, Etxeberria and Martínez-González, 1999; Curran, 1989; Martínez-González, 1998; Martínez-González and Pérez-Herrero, 2004). By doing so family-school partnership is enhanced and parents are supported when developing their parental role.

In this paper we are describing the structure of a parenting programme performed in a Spanish school as well as some of the results obtained.

### **Objective**

The main objective of this study is to identify parents' needs regarding their parental role with small children and to evaluate the adequacy of a parenting programme carried out within a school. The aim is to identify effective ways for promoting family-school partnerships which help parents feel more assertive with their

role and better involved in their children's education.

### **Method**

The Context-Input-Process-Product (CIPP) programme evaluation model proposed by Stufflebeam has been used as methodological framework to perform and evaluate the parenting programme (Stufflebeam 1995, 2000). This model takes into account the characteristics of the context (C) in which an intervention is performed, the particular needs of the people involved (I), the processes by which the intervention was performed (P) and the products which come from it (P). Accordingly, the study has been organized in two phases; the first one addresses family needs assessment regarding parents' satisfaction with their parental role (input) given their particular circumstances with small children (context) and the second one describes how a parenting programme was performed to answer those needs (process) and the results obtained (product).

This programme is based on an empowerment model in parenting (Currant, 1989; Miller and Seller, 1990) which assumes that through educational initiatives parents are able to develop positive parenting attitudes and effective family processes. This enables them to feel more assertive and satisfied with their role. Accordingly, an active and participative methodology based on groups dynamics was developed with the aim of helping parents to discuss their ideas and behaviour regarding their parental role in areas of information and strategies they themselves had identified as parental needs. These strategies were addressed in a two hour weekly sessions coordinated by an expert in family education and with the support of a second expert who assisted in collecting information and who acted as an external evaluator; the data gathered by these two experts was contrasted for validation to guarantee objectivity in the process of programme evaluation.

It is expected that by sharing daily experiences, parenting strategies, opinions and worries about children's education, parents be more able to learn from one another and to transform their previous ideas and behaviours about parenting into more effective ones.

### *Sample*

The sample is composed of 54 Spanish parents with small children (2-6 years old) who voluntarily agreed to take part in a parenting programme offered to them by their children's school or by the Town Hall's social services. This programme was performed several times with different groups of parents, of whom all together,

13 came from a rural area and 41 from an urban one. Most of the parents (72%) are aged between 31 and 40 years and the distribution of their educational levels are: 26% have primary education, 48% secondary education and 26% university studies.

#### *Issues addressed and procedures to gather and to analyse information*

The issues analyzed for *family needs assessment in phase one (context-input)* are classified into three dimensions: Dimension 1) Parents' perceptions of their parental role, which includes four variables: 1.1-parents perceive they are performing their parental role well, 1.2-parents perceive they are competent enough to help their children when problems arise, 1.3-both father and mother agree in their parenting style, and 1.4-parenting tasks perceived by them as the most difficult and the easiest; Dimension 2) Parenting strategies used by parents, which includes four variables: 2.1-parents perceive they have control on and are able to establish limits to their children's behaviour, 2.2-both parents take decisions together about the best parenting style for their children, 2.3-parents perceive there is communication between parents and children in the family, and 2.4-parental behaviour and attitudes perceived by parents which help them best and those which makes it more difficult for them to perform their parental role; Dimension 3) Parents' needs to learn about parenting strategies, which includes five variables: 3.1-parents perceive they have enough information about parental strategies, 3.2-parents' expectations about learning parental strategies, 3.3-parents' participation in previous parenting programmes, 3.4-parents' expectation that parenting programmes should be offered to them by their children's school, and 3.5-areas and strategies parents would like to be trained on.

To gather information about these variables a questionnaire with a Likert scale answers of the type 1-not agreement at all to 5-total agreement was administered to parents; also group dynamics with parents allowed to collect qualitative information about parents' satisfaction with their parental role in phase one (context-input).

The issues analysed when evaluating the parenting programme in *phase two (process-product)* are classified into two dimensions: Dimension 1) Process of programme development, which includes five variables: 1.1-adequacy of the contents as perceived by parents, 1.2-adequacy of the methodology, 1.3-adequacy of the performance of the programme coordinator, 1.4-parents' participation and their integration in the group, and 1.5-parents' motivation towards the programme; and Dimension 2) Programme

results, which includes four variables: 2.1-parents' acquisition of parenting strategies, 2.2-cognitive changes perceived by parents as regards their parental role, 2.3-parents' satisfaction with the programme, and 2.4-parents' involvement in the school and in the community.

Both qualitative and quantitative procedures to gather information about these variables have been used in phase two. Qualitative procedures used were 1) participative observation on the part of the programme coordinator and the external evaluator, 2) parents' and the coordinator's self-reports about the performance of the programme, 3) group dynamics with parents, and 4) a diary written by the programme coordinator. Quantitative information was collected through a questionnaire which answers were coded in a Likert scale from 1-not at all adequate, to 5-very adequate. Suggested issues for further programmes were also asked in open questions, as well as parents' expectations of taking part in further parenting programmes. In this study the variety of procedures used to gather information allowed us to validate the data collected in each phase.

The data was analysed through qualitative and quantitative procedures and software programmes: SPSS statistical software was used to obtain descriptive measures from scale items of the questionnaires. Additionally, Qualita software helped to analyse the qualitative information gathered through questionnaires' open questions, self-reports, participative observation, group dynamics, and the coordinator's diary (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

## Results

Results are presented according to the two phases of the research and the issues analysed in each of them.

### *Phase One. Family needs assessment regarding parents' satisfaction with their parental role (context-input)*

In this section, results about how parents perceive their role with small children, the parenting strategies they need and the satisfaction they feel are offered.

#### Parents' perception of their parental role

Most parents believe they are *performing their parental role well* (79.62%), but 20.37% have some doubts about it (11 families out of 54) and 9.25% (5 families) admit they *do not feel competent enough to help their children when problems arise*. Both *father and mother seem to agree in their parenting style* (75.92%) whereas 24.08% (13 families out of 54) do not.

Regarding the *parenting tasks perceived as most difficult*, parents have pointed out through their comments in open questions the following: 1) to maintain discipline and limits, 2) to control their children's behaviour, 3) to apply punishment correctly, 4) to explain their children things accurately and 5) to help them to adapt to the school system. On the other hand, *they perceived as easiest tasks*: 1) to interact with their children, 2) to play with them, 3) to listen to them and 4) to transmit them values of respect towards people and things.

#### Parenting strategies

Although 62.96% of the parents agreed *they have control on and are able to establish limits to their children's behaviour*, 37.04% of them (20 families out of 54) are not sure about that, which is consistent with the parents' comments mentioned before. Also, 24.07% (13 families) admit that both parents do not *discuss enough and take decisions together about the best parenting style for their children*. Most of them, nevertheless, agree *there is communication between parents and children in the family* (90.74%); yet, 9.26% (5 families) have some doubts about it.

Taking into account the *parental behaviours and attitudes that help parents best perform their parental role*, they suggest love and understanding towards their children; on the contrary, impatience, being eager and angry with them makes it *more difficult for parents to perform this role*. That is, parents would need to learn about self-control strategies.

#### Parents' needs to learn about parenting strategies

A substantial number of parents (53.71%) remark they have little or no information at all *about parental strategies*, and most of them (90.74%) *would like to learn about it*. A similar number *have never participated in a parenting programme to learn such strategies* and 92.6% think these *programmes would be of great value for them* if offered by their children's school (92.6%).

When asking parents about themes and strategies they would like to be informed of most of them point out: 1) small children's characteristic, 2) how to understand their children's behaviour and how to establish limits to it, 3) how to talk to them, 4) how to teach them values and 5) how to promote social interaction in them.

As a conclusion of phase one it can be said that in general the parents participating in this research perceive they are performing their role with their small children well, but at the same time they would like to learn some parenting strategies which would help them to feel surer when educating their children. Very few have had the opportunity to take part in a parenting programme before and most of them would appreciate it if their children's school would offer one to them.

#### *Phase two. Process and products of the parenting programme*

In this section results about programme process evaluation and products are examined.

#### Adequacy of Content as perceived by parents

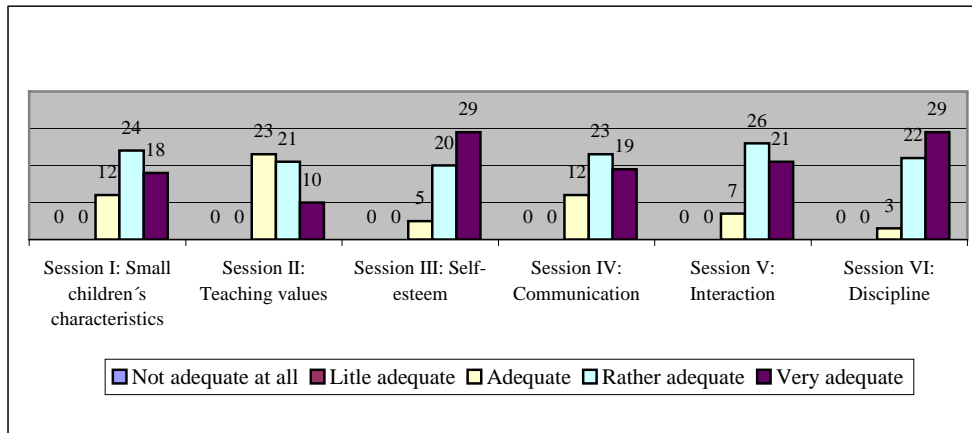
The contents of the programme focused on the following areas of information and strategies identified as parental needs in the assessment phase: 1) small children's characteristics and their expected behaviours, 2) teaching values to small children, 3) building parents' and small children's self-esteem, 4) communication strategies, 5) parents-children interaction, and 6) building up discipline with small children.

All parents with no exception (100%) valued the six areas of content of the programme as adequate or very adequate, as shown in the frequencies of figure 1. The contents they liked most were *self-esteem* and *discipline* with small children. It is worth noticing that these were the issues they highlighted most in the needs assessment phase.

#### Adequacy of Methodology as perceived by parents

The methodology of the programme was based on group dynamics. According to parents' comments in their written self-reports, this methodology helped them "to share parenting strategies", "to meet people" and "to learn from others". This made each session and the whole programme not only enjoyable but also profitable. Among the pitfalls parents found regarding the methodology are: 1) when the programme began some parents did not feel like talking about their parenting experiences with people they did not know previously; nevertheless, this behaviour changed to a more assertive one while the programme sessions were in progress, and 2) some other parents spoke so much that some times it was difficult to respect other parents' turns.

**Figure 1. Parents' opinions about the Content of the Parenting programme (frequencies)**



Adequacy of the performance of the programme Coordinator

The programme coordinator was very well valued by all parents in every session. In their written self-reports they highlighted her ability to: 1) promote participation, 2) focus parents' discussions on the main theme, and 3) answer parents' demands. Parents also pointed out some issues the programme coordinator could improve, such as control of time discussions; as mentioned before some parents would have liked more time to discuss.

Parents' participation and their integration in the group

Most parents attended the sessions and appreciated the others doing the same. When some parents did not, the other parents noticed it because there were fewer opportunities of group interaction. They liked to contrast with one another their parenting ideas and the daily experiences they had with their children. As mentioned when talking about adequacy of methodology, as sessions progressed, parents felt more integrated in the groups; this helped them to share more experiences and to feel more relaxed regarding their parental role.

On the other hand, parents' interactions through group dynamics helped them to build up networks among parents who did not know each other before, to the point that they were still kept

after finishing the programme; some parents coming from at-risk families found a great emotional support in these networks.

Parents' motivation towards the programme

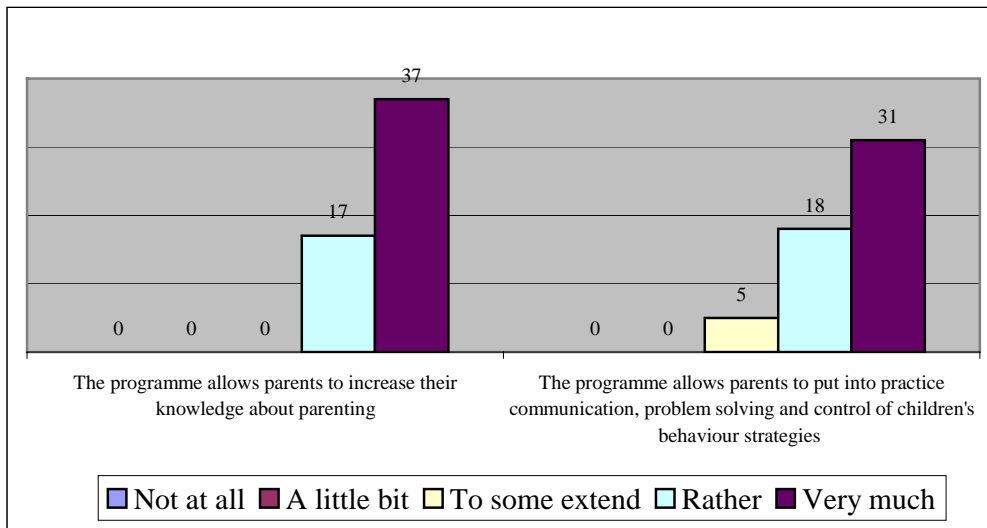
As sessions progressed, parents reported in their written self-reports that they had: 1) learnt about how to develop personal and parenting strategies; 2) felt more relaxed and patient with their children, and 3) become more aware of the effects of their behaviour when

interacting with their children. All of which helped them to better control their own behaviour.

Parents' acquisition of parenting strategies

According to parents' oral and written self-reports, parents' interactions in the programme allowed them to listen to one another, to express themselves, to feel they were listened to, to let others know about their strategies to educate their children, to learn strategies from other parents, and to experiment new parenting strategies at home. On the other hand, the 100% agreed the programme had allowed them to increase their knowledge about parenting strategies and to put into practice effective communication, problem solving and control of children's behaviour strategies. Frequency results are shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2. The programme allows parents to increase their knowledge and strategies about parenting (frequencies)**



Cognitive changes perceived by parents as regards their parental role

Parents' self-reports and participative observation on the part of the programme coordinator showed that by sharing information through group discussions parents realized they were not the only ones who had a particular worry or problem as regards their children's education; the 100% agreed the programme had helped them both to understand their children and themselves better, which, in turn, allowed them to feel more relaxed about their parental role, to accept parenting challenges better and to increase their emotional self-control. They learnt to reconsider their own lives and family circumstances more rationally, and also to feel more competent at identifying their own emotions. They increased their vocabulary about feelings and emotions, which contributed to help them to express themselves better.

Debates in the programme sessions also helped parents to learn that a particular family situation could be interpreted from different perspectives, each of them bringing different ways for the situation to be solved, thus producing different effects on family interactions. Parents could learn to select the best alternatives for their particular family context and to experiment them.

As a consequence, they were aware that parents were the ones able to control the family situation and not the other way round. As a result, parents could feel more competent with their parental role: the 100% agreed the programme had helped them to feel more confident with this role. Frequency results are shown in figure 3.

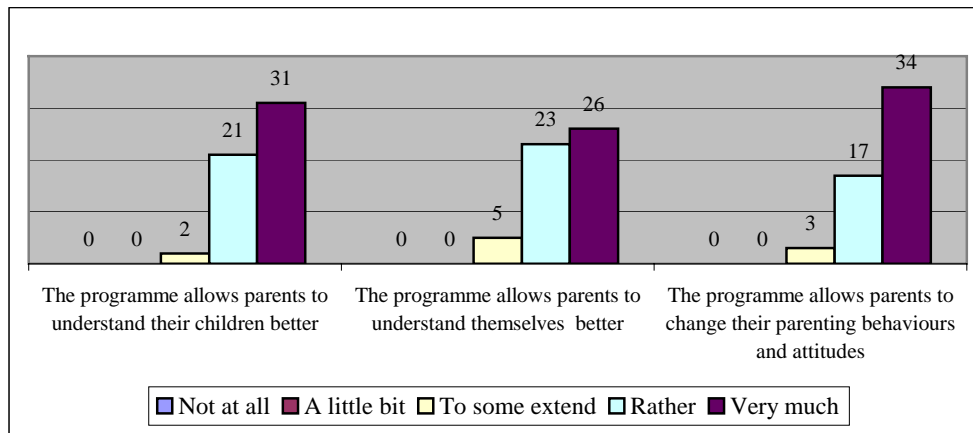
Parents' satisfaction with the programme

All parents with no exception agreed they were very satisfied with the programme: the 100% valued its objectives, contents, methodology, sessions' atmosphere, resources, timetable and the performance of the programme coordinator as adequate or very adequate.

Self-esteem and self-control strategies were the *contents* parents liked the most in the programme. They found it necessary to build their own self-esteem to be able to help their children to build theirs. Moreover, by feeling self-competent, parents were more assertive when applying discipline strategies to help their children to learn to control their behaviour.

Some parents suggested (7.4%, 4 parents out of 54) to extend the sessions a half an hour, that is, to make them last two hours and a half to increase the time for interaction and discussion.

**Figure 3. Cognitive changes perceived by parents as regards their parental role (frequencies)**



Parents' involvement in the school and in the community

Parents agreed the programme had contributed to increase their participation in the school and in the community. For some parents in the rural area this was the first time they had attended an activity in the town hall centre where the programme was performed. Also, for urban parents, this was the first time they all attended the school as a group to meet other parents in order to discuss common issues and worries about their children's education. Moreover, in some other occasions the parents got involved in other activities the community and the school organized.

Thus parental involvement at schools and at the community and family-school-community partnerships can be stimulated by inviting parents to participate in parenting programmes, which are of great interest for them.

**Conclusions**

Results obtained from *phase one* of this research reveal that most parents participating in this study are satisfied with their parental role with their small children (2-6 years old); they find it rewarding to interact with them. Yet, many of them feel they lack information and parenting strategies to better understand their children, to communicate with them, to establish limits to children's behaviour, to help their children to be cooperative, to teach them values of respect to others and to help them to adapt to the school system. They would like to be more confident on these areas and to learn effective parenting strategies.

In order to answer these parental needs, a parenting programme was designed, performed several times in different settings and with different groups of parents and evaluated. Parents valued its contents, methodology, resources, timetable, sessions' atmosphere and the performance of the programme coordinator as very adequate. They have been able to share their parenting worries, doubts and strategies, learn from one another, experiment new strategies and change some of their previous behaviours and ideas on parenting. As a result, parents felt more relaxed, confident and happier with their parental role. Their relationships with the other parents participating in the programme increased, and new networks of parents were built in the urban schools and in the rural community where the programme was performed. Their involvement at these schools and at the community has increased as well. Thus, parenting programmes seem to be an effective resource to stimulate parents' networks, as well as their involvement at the school and in the community and to promote family-school-community partnerships.

### Recommendations

From these conclusions, some recommendations for social and educational policies regarding supporting parents to effectively perform their parental role can be made. It seems necessary to perform parenting programmes which help parents to answer their doubts and worries as regards their children's education; this would allow them to prevent family problems from the time children are small, to support the family as a socializing agent for children and as protective context against social factors that might put children at risk, and to increase family-school-

community partnerships as an effective strategy to assist parents to perform their parental role.

In order to achieve these aims, schools and social institutions should be supported by experienced professionals in the field of family education, who in turn, should be effectively trained by academic institutions in strategies to assess family needs, to design parenting programmes, to effectively conduct groups of parents that empower them to deal with family problems and to evaluate these programmes.

That is, Parental Education should be understood as a professional career to be supported by educational policies.

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