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Participation of Parents of Elementary School Students in their Children's Academic Activities

Participación de los padres de alumnos de educación primaria en las actividades académicas de sus hijos

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Abstract

This article describes the degree of parental involvement in the educational activities of elementary school children in the State of Yucatán. Based on the opinion of experts and references in the relevant literature, a Likert-type scale with 36 items was designed and applied to 106 parents of students at a public elementary school in the city of Mérida, capital of the state of Yucatan, in order to evaluate their involvement. The results show that the scale has an acceptable reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha = .92) and its underlying structure, after a factor analysis with varimax rotation, consists of three unit factors: 1) *Communication with the school*; 2) *Communication with the child*, and 3) *Knowledge of the school*. Generally, the results show that parent involvement in children's educational activities is low or precarious, especially in regard to the factors of *Communication and Knowledge of the school*, although mothers have a considerably higher level of involvement than fathers in these factors. The implications of these findings for the school as well as for research on parental participation in the educational process are discussed in light of the results.

Key words: Elementary education, parent participation, parent school relationship, parent student relationship.

Resumen

El presente trabajo describe el grado de participación de padres y madres de niños de primaria del estado de Yucatán, en México, en las actividades educativas de sus hijos. Con base en juicio de expertos y en referentes de la literatura, se diseñó una escala tipo Lickert con 36 ítems para evaluar la participación, que fue administrada a 106 padres de familia de alumnos de una escuela primaria pública de la ciudad de Mérida, capital de Yucatán. Los resultados muestran que la escala tiene un coeficiente de confiabilidad aceptable (alfa de Crombach = 0.92) y que su estructura subyacente, después de un análisis factorial con rotación varimax, consiste en tres factores principales: 1) *Comunicación con la escuela*; 2) *Comunicación con el hijo*, y 3) *Conocimiento de la escuela*. En general, la participación de los padres en las actividades educativas de los hijos se clasificó como baja o precaria, especialmente en lo referido a los factores de *Comunicación y Conocimiento de la escuela*, mientras las madres presentaron un nivel de participación significativamente mayor en ambos factores. Las implicaciones de los resultados para la escuela y la investigación sobre participación paterna en el proceso educativo, se discuten a la luz de los resultados.

Palabras clave: Educación primaria, participación de los padres, relación entre padres y escuela, relación entre padres y el estudiante.

Introduction

According to figures from the National Institute for Educational Evaluation in Mexico (inee, 2003), upon completion of elementary school, 63% of students have writing skills below the minimum expected. Middle school entrance exams show that enrollees also have weak skills in verbal and mathematical reasoning (Secretaría de Educación Pública (Ministry of Public Education) [SEP], 2001).

Although this low competency level has multiple causes, the present study focuses on the role of the Mexican family in boosting academic performance, since it has been argued that the family exerts a significant influence on the scores obtained by students on tests of knowledge and on their adjustment to the school context. There are few studies that corroborate and clarify how this occurs in the Mexican context.

In the United States, the Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld and York report (1966) demonstrated that factors such as the socioeconomic status of the family and parents' educational level influence students' scores. Balli, Wedman and Demo (1997) report that completion of homework assignments and parental supervision of them were important factors in school performance.

In Mexico, González, Corral, Frías and Miranda (1998) associated parental affection, time devoted to children and parents' interest in meeting their children's teachers with high self-esteem in their offspring, which, at the same time, stimulated academic effort. Martínez (2004) suggests that the factor with the most influence on school performance consists of family practices, even more than—or despite—the demographic, economic and community circumstances that surround the student.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2004) urges family cohesiveness and bases this need on three considerations: the recognition that parents are the primary educators of their children; the positive impact that a quality early education can have on children's development and learning; and the family as a privileged space for extending the reach of early childhood education.

The National Institute for Educational Evaluation in Mexico (inee, 2003) argues that to improve the quality of education, effective interaction between parents and teachers—and, in general, among all sectors of society—is essential. In order to assess the quality of the educational system, this agency includes in its present and future indicators the following family-related aspects: index of basic household equipment; level of overcrowding in the home; index of family access to communication media; parents' educational level; percentage of students whose parents' expectations for them are a high school education or above; percentage of parents who are in the habit of reading; rate of parental involvement; and percentage of parents who participate in parent-teacher meetings in the school.

Miranda (1995) comments that parental involvement can be evaluated through two aspects: one is through their own information about the school and the other through their involvement in school activities; he argues that parents' information about what is happening in the school fosters greater participation in their children's school activities.

Guzmán and Martín del Campo (2001) mention that, unlike other countries such as England, where parents make decisions about educational and organizational aspects of schools, in Mexico parents are usually not involved in these decisions. In theory there are councils of social participation in which they can raise pedagogical issues and participate in improving educational processes, but in practice these organisms are almost nonexistent and thus fail to perform these functions.

While in Mexico there is a legal basis for the establishment of cooperative relations between home and school, the reality is that they rarely join forces for the achievement of educational objectives. Moreover, the agencies responsible for regulating education report a lack of parental integration in school activities (Secretaría de Educación Pública (Ministry of Public Education) [SEP], 2004).

Nidia Victoria (2003) states that one of the characteristics of current educational policy in Mexico is the promotion of greater parental involvement in the school, especially in regard to their children's teaching-learning process. In everyday practice this has led to various actions, of which some of the most important are the demand for greater participation of parents in parent-school associations and a more frequent parental presence in the school and at its activities.

In Yucatan, studies related to parental participation in their children's education are few; thus, there is a need to develop research that explores how parents in this region are involved in their children's schooling. This paper aims to provide an approach to the way in which the involvement of fathers and mothers in their children's academic activities is manifested.

This research aims to answer the following questions:

- What is the level of parental involvement in the academic activities of their elementary school children?
- Are there differences between fathers and mothers in the level of participation?

Machen, Wilson and Notar (2005) showed that parental involvement can help improve the quality of the public school system, and that participatory parents can provide a mosaic of opportunities for their children to succeed in their passage through school. According to these authors, in the educational systems of many countries, fostering collaboration between parents and schools has increasingly gained importance. Furthermore, López and Tedesco (2002) claim that the family should ensure the necessary economic conditions to enable their children to attend school on a daily basis and that they should prepare children from birth to be able to participate actively in school and to learn. Such preparation presupposes the family's access to a variety of resources, among which the most salient include economic resources, availability of time to oversee children's studies, the ability to encourage their participation in cultural activities and the capacity to provide affection and stability.

All of this presumes that the family has the ability to cope with both material and nonmaterial demands. First, it implies being able to afford the increasing costs associated with children's education, while simultaneously dispensing with any income children or adolescents would contribute if they were to work. Second, it implies nurturing their motivation to study and maintaining stability in the running of the home.

Parental participation refers to the involvement of parents in one or more school-related activities, such as attending meetings for parents, voluntary participation in school improvement projects, helping children with homework and encouraging them in their achievements, to name a few.

According to Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Burow (1995), there are several factors that encourage parental involvement in school-related activities. The first is that parents have observed such participation modeled by their own parents and other adults; the second is that parents possess a sense of personal efficacy for helping their children succeed in school. This perception of effectiveness may be reduced if parents feel that they lack the skills and knowledge to help their children succeed. The third factor is that parental involvement increases if they see opportunities or receive invitations and requests for assistance from school staff and from their children.

Epstein and Clark Salinas (2004) propose a classification of parental involvement strategies, which includes six categories: parenting skills; school-home communication; parent participation as volunteers in schools, in learning activities at home and in school decision-making; and parents' collaboration with the school and the community.

In terms of home factors that influence children's school performance, the type of supervision of learning that parents implement at home can be mentioned. Avanzini (1969) mentions that there are unconcerned parents who refuse to consistently make the efforts required to support their children in their educational activities and other parents who realize that they should support their children, but are unable to do so because of a lack of time and educational background.

Shanahan and Walberg (1985) report that parents' interest and favorable conditions provided in the home for doing schoolwork are among the home factors which are conducive to adequate performance at school. Moreover, Steinberg, Dornbusch and Brown (1992) point out that parents who are demanding in regard to their children's schoolwork, while at the same time providing for the requirements of this work, encourage the development of academic competence.

Epstein and Clark Salinas (2004) developed a study that sought to assess an intervention to promote learning and parental involvement in home learning activities. The intervention consisted of encouraging parents to spend at least 15 minutes with their children on activities aimed at helping them develop school-related skills. Parents and teachers perceived a variety of favorable outcomes

from the intervention, most significantly, improvements in the academic and social conduct of students and in parents' skills in communicating with teachers.

On the other hand Balli, Wedman and Demo (1997) explain that while parents consider their oversight to be valuable, they also feel that their execution of this task is not effective, and their involvement decreases significantly as children move from elementary to middle school, since at that level parents express frustration with their intellectual ability to assist children by supervising their homework.

In regard to *communication with the school*, Esquivel (1995) indicates that communication between family members is a key factor in the establishment of the home-school relationship, because poor or nonexistent communication at home is transferred to the school environment. When that is the case, the result is that parents have ineffective communication with school teachers and administrators, which can prove to be confusing and misleading as well as not being conducive to students' educational process.

Oliva and Palacios (1998) argue that parents should be concerned with knowing—through formal or informal meetings with their children's teachers—about issues such as the objectives, methods and content of school curriculum and what activities can be carried out at home to support their children's school progress.

Regarding expectations and perception of the value of school, Epstein and Clark Salinas (2004) maintain that students at all levels do better academic work and have more positive attitudes toward school, higher aspirations and other positive behaviors if their parents place value on education and on their children's academic achievements.

Miranda (1995) reports that the number of studies on parental attitudes toward school is much lower than that of research related to other members of the school community (teachers and students). However, when it comes to interpreting the differences in the value that individuals assign to education according to their social origin, the most interesting aspect to investigate is the attitude of parents of school children. In this respect, the author points out two opposing positions: one of them claims that there is at present a trend towards the devaluation of school; the other holds that there is currently a positive valuation of schooling by families, for whom education represents an essential value for their children's future as a means of improving social position and fulfilling new expectations and ways of life.

Among the characteristics of families that promote academic success, Van Acker and Wehby (2000) identified setting and modeling high expectations for the social and academic behavior of their children.

In reference to participation in school activities, Avanzini (1969) points out that the intellectual background of parents is reflected in their educational activities, such as reading, attending cultural events and the manner in which they organize their free time. This means that student performance depends on several factors: the work that the child does, his willingness and attention and also the cultural

conditioning that prepares or disposes him for the type of intellectual activity required of him in the classroom.

Bello (2004) asserts that parental behaviors such as reading to children, discussing issues of intellectual interest and listening to their opinions, are not arbitrary skills that are applied to all children; rather they are used by parents with educational styles or strategies that encourage or enable the intellectual and emotional empowerment of children. López and Tedesco (2002) point out that families who support their children's educational process, in addition to providing the material conditions necessary for their studies, furnish the elements and values of a cultural and educational climate that allow children to accept and respond effectively to the demands of school.

Method

To carry out this research, we conducted a quantitative and descriptive field study.

1.1 Population and Sample

A census was taken with the participation of 106 parents of first and second graders, who, on being approached when they arrived to pick up their children from school, voluntarily agreed to answer the questionnaire. Of the 67 students enrolled in those grades, at least one parent participated. Altogether, 51 fathers and 55 mothers answered the questionnaire.

1.2. Instruments

Family involvement scale

The research instrument was developed to assess parental involvement in their children's school-related activities. It consists of a demographic section with general information and 36 items on a Likert-type scale; the scale that was used was: 0 = Never, 1 = Rarely, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often and 4 = Always.

A specification table was developed with five factors derived from theory, which are listed below.

1. Parental presence in the school and participation in school activities. Questions 1 to 7 assess parental participation when their presence is required at their children's school for different school activities.
2. Communication with teachers. Questions 8 to 15 assess the relationship parents have with their children's teachers.
3. Knowledge of curriculum and school functioning. Questions 16 to 19 gauge how informed parents are regarding teachers' professional training, the school's rules and its functioning.

4. Communication with children regarding school matters. Questions 20 to 25 evaluate parents' knowledge of school activities and their children's relationships with teachers and classmates.
5. Helping with homework. Questions 26 to 36 assess the assistance that parents give their children with homework assignments and whether they have the materials, time and an appropriate place in which to do them.

Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the final instrument was calculated, with a resulting value of .92.

Finally, we performed a factor analysis using the varimax rotation method, extracting three factors from its results: the first was named *Communication with the school*, the second, *Communication with the child* and the third, *Knowledge of the school*. Table I summarizes the factorial analysis and derived factors.

Table I. Factor analysis with varimax rotation: derived factors

Item	Factors		
	1	2	3
Talks with the teacher about the child's learning	.896		
Talks with the teacher about a concern expressed by the child	.869		
Attends school meetings	.803		
Talks with the teacher about the child's homework and class participation	.792		
Talks with the teacher about the child's chores at home	.790		
Talks with the teacher about the child's performance and conduct	.788		
Maintains a good relationship with the child's teacher	.740		
Shows up at school when summoned	.724		
Attends talks by experts organized by the school	.686		
Picks up child at school	.658		
Has a different opinion regarding what affects the child's behavior	.626		
Participates in raffles organized for school improvement	.607		
Monitors completion of homework assignments	.684		
Has a different opinion regarding what affects child's academic performance	.575		
Talks with the child about his classmates		.750	
Talks with the child about what he did at school		.727	
Talks with the child about what he did in different classes		.720	
Knows about support services provided by the school		.713	
Talks with the child about his relationship with the teacher		.705	
Knows the school's evaluation and grading system			.743
Knows the rules of the school			.688
Knows the training and experience of his child's teacher			.639
Praises child when he completes schoolwork			.589

Because of this *post hoc* structure and the need to compare different areas of involvement, we decided to explore the differences in these three factors, to which end the three subscales were converted to a scale of 0 to 10.

1.3 Procedure for data collection

For the data collection, we requested the consent of school authorities and the voluntary cooperation of parents, who were given the questionnaire to take home with them and return the following day.

II. Results

2.1 Sociodemographic Characteristics

Both parents of most of the children (98%) in the sample are alive. The mothers' ages ranged from 24 to 52 years old, with an average age of 37; the fathers were between 27 and 59 years of age, with an average age of 38. As can be seen, the average age of both parents is similar.

The highest percentage (76%) represents married parents. As far as educational level, slightly less than 40% of mothers did not complete middle school, as well as a third of fathers. Only a small percentage of fathers and mothers finished college. This can be seen in Table II.

Table II. Frequency and percentages of educational level of parents

Educational Level	Mothers		Fathers	
	F	Percentage	F	Percentage
None	6	11%	4	8%
Elementary	17	31%	12	23%
Middle School	15	27%	16	31%
High School	9	16%	11	22%
College	5	9%	6	12%
Didn't answer	3	4%	2	4%
Total	55	100%	51	100%

Table III shows the parents' occupations. More than a third of mothers work as homemakers and of those that work outside the home, most do so in non-professional occupations. All of the fathers work, three-fourths of them as laborers.

Table III. Frequency and percentages of parental occupation

Occupation	Mothers		Fathers	
	F	Percentage	F	Percentage
Not employed	22	40%	-	-
Laborer	18	33%	38	74%
Technician	4	7%	3	6%
Business	5	9%	3	6%
Professional	4	7%	6	12%
Didn't answer	2	4%	1	2%
Total	55	100%	51	100%

Regarding the type of housing, almost a third of the families studied own their homes, most of which have basic services. Less than half have the services and appliances that are considered a luxury in our context.

2.2 Parental involvement in their children's education

Table IV shows the rate of frequency of parental involvement and their percentages by area. The following criteria were used for classification: 0-4, low; 5-7, medium; and 8-10 points, high. These criteria were established based on the maximum possible score in each area, which corresponds to a value of 10 on the scale; thus for each parent we obtained a score on a scale of 1-10 for his or her participation, by the rule of three.

Table IV. Level of involvement in children's school activities for both parents

Factor	Percentage of subjects by level of participation		
	Low	Medium	High
Communication with school	45%	36%	19%
Communication with child	20%	36%	44%
Knowledge of school	47%	25%	28%

As can be observed, with the exception of the factor *Communication with child*, where almost half of parents report a high level of communication, in the other dimensions that were evaluated (*Communication with school and Knowledge of school*), parental participation was not encouraging.

Table V presents the means and standard deviations of the scores of both parents in each of the dimensions.

Table V. Means and standard deviations of the scores for both parents

Factor	Mean	Standard deviation
Communication with school	6.05	2.58
Communication with child	8.26	4.07
Knowledge of school	6.26	3.11

To determine if there were significant differences between the average scores for each of the dimensions, we performed an analysis of variance, which is presented in Table VI.

Table VI. Analysis of variance of the scores for the dimensions

Source	DF	F	P
Dimensions	2	12.464	.000
Error	275		
Total	277		

These results show significant differences between the average scores for each dimension; upon completion of multiple comparisons, it was determined that the highest score corresponded to the *Communication with child* dimension, while no differences were found between the scores for *Communication with school* and *Knowledge of school*.

Table VII describes parental involvement according to gender; mothers had higher scores in all dimensions than fathers.

Table VII. Level of participation of mothers and fathers in their children's school activities

Factors	Mothers			Fathers		
	Low	Average	Good	Low	Average	Good
Communication with school	17 (31%)	26 (47%)	12 (22%)	31 (60%)	12 (24%)	8 (16%)
Communication with child	7 (13%)	21 (38%)	27 (49%)	15 (29%)	14 (27%)	22 (44%)
Knowledge of school	19 (35%)	19 (35%)	17 (30%)	30 (59%)	5 (10%)	16 (31%)

In regard to the mothers, their scores indicated low participation in their children's academic activities in the dimensions of *Communication and Knowledge of school*. Even in the area of *Communication with child*, which received the highest scores, only half the mothers reported having a good level of communication with their child about school-related topics.

Table VIII shows the means and standard deviations of the scores obtained by the mothers in each of the dimensions.

Table VIII. Means and standard deviations of scores obtained by the mothers

Factor	Mean	Standard deviation
Communication with school	6.98	1.87
Communication with child	8.38	3.17
Knowledge of school	7.01	2.69

To determine if there were significant differences between the mothers' average scores for each of the dimensions, we performed an analysis of variance, the results of which are presented in Table IX.

Table IX. Analysis of variance of the scores for the dimensions

Source	DF	F	P
Dimensions	2	4.521	.012
Error	146		
Total	148		

These results show significant differences between the mothers' mean scores in each dimension. When we performed multiple comparisons using the least significant difference (LSD) method, we found that the *Communication with child* dimension obtained higher scores than the other two dimensions.

As far as the fathers are concerned, their scores showed low participation in their children's academic activities in the dimensions of *Communication and Knowledge of school*. In the dimension of *Communication with child*, the area which received the highest scores, only slightly more than 40% of fathers said that they have good communication with their child regarding school-related issues.

In Table X we can see the means and standard deviations of the scores received by fathers for each of the dimensions that were analyzed.

Table X. Means and standard deviations of the scores obtained by fathers

Factor	Mean	Standard deviation
Communication with school	5	2.89
Communication with child	8.13	4.92
Knowledge of school	5.34	3.39

To determine if there were significant differences between the fathers' average scores for each of the dimensions, we performed an analysis of variance, which is presented in Table XI.

Table XI. Analysis of variance of the scores for the dimensions

Source	DF	F	P
Dimensions	2	8.636	.000
Error	126		
Total	128		

The above shows that there are significant differences between the fathers' mean scores in each dimension. When we performed multiple comparisons using the least significant difference (LSD) method, we found that the *Communication with child* dimension obtained higher scores than the other two dimensions.

To determine if the observed differences in participation between mothers and fathers were significant, a comparison of means was performed using a “t” test for independent samples. The results showed that mothers’ participation is greater ($t = 3.807$, $p < .05$). Table XII presents the results of the comparison of means of fathers and mothers in each of the dimensions analyzed, by means of a “t” test for independent samples.

Table XII. Comparison by factor between fathers’ and mothers’ scores

Factor	t	Level of significance
Communication with school	3.807	.000
Communication with child	.294	.770
Knowledge of school	2.62	.01

The results shown in Table XII indicate that there is divergence between fathers and mothers in their participation in the areas of *Communication and Knowledge of school*.

III. Discussion and conclusions

The results of this study show that in this group of parents, the sociodemographic variable of educational level was the only factor that established a difference in the degree of involvement in their children’s education. This is widely supported by the academic literature, which affirms that parents with higher educational levels participate more in their children’s education (Criado, Palomares and Bueno, 2000; Valdés, 2001; Tzec, Esquivel and Sánchez, 2004).

In general, few parents describe their participation in their children’s school activities as good, particularly in the areas of *Communication and Knowledge of school*, a situation which manifests the existence of a problem in Mexican education: low parental involvement in school activities. Many studies note that the level of parental involvement is an important indicator of children’s academic performance (Navarro, Vaccari and Canales, 2001; Guevara, 1996).

Regarding the factor *Communication with child*, slightly more than half of mothers and 40% of fathers report having good communication. These data, while not totally satisfactory, suggest that parents conceive of the task of providing educational support for their children as being confined to the home and that there is no need for greater ties with the school and with teachers.

Although in general there were no significant differences between the levels of participation of mothers and fathers, it is fair to say that in all the dimensions analyzed, there was a tendency for mothers to have higher scores. Even in the factors *Communication and Knowledge of school*, there were significant differences between the involvement of mothers and that of fathers, in favor of the former.

This suggests that those responsible for building a bridge between home and school are mothers; it would appear that mothers extend their understanding of educational support for their children to include not just the home but relations with the school as well. This also reflects a cultural pattern of Mexican society where primary responsibility for the education of children is assigned to mothers, leaving fathers in a peripheral position.

The questions on the scale where the greatest problems were found relate to communication with teachers about children's behavior and academic performance. This is a reflection of the usually tense relationship that exists between parents and teachers, which, according to the relevant literature, tends to arise as a result of the fact that both groups blame each other for the problems of children and adolescents.

In general, the results of this study indicate that:

1. Parents' educational level has a slight but positive correlation with their involvement in children's school activities.
2. Generally, fathers and mothers report a poor level of participation in their children's school activities, particularly those aspects that relate to their interaction with the school.
3. The greatest parental involvement is evinced in the factor *Communication with child*, which suggests that parents circumscribe educational support for their children to the home and fail to visualize the importance of their relationship with the school as a means of fostering their children's academic achievement.
4. There were no significant differences in the overall level of involvement between fathers and mothers.
5. Mothers' scores were higher than fathers' in all of the factors evaluated, even showing significant differences in the areas of *Communication and Knowledge of school*, which suggests that it is primarily the mother who establishes the home-school relationship.
6. The items with the lowest scores are those that assess aspects influenced by interaction and communication between parents and teachers, which implies that the most critical point of parental involvement concerns their relationship with teachers.

The above conclusions highlight the need to design school policies aimed at increasing the involvement of fathers and mothers in their children's academic activities. In particular, it is important to develop actions that promote communication between parents and teachers as well as awareness of the school curriculum.

Finally, it is essential to raise awareness in both fathers and mothers of the need to eliminate gender stereotypes that assign women the responsibility for the education of children, while relegating fathers to a merely peripheral position.

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