

Participation of Parents in a Project of Curricular Modification in Educational Institutions in Bucaramanga, Colombia: an Actor Who Needs to Become Visible

Yolima Ivonne Beltrán Villamizar¹, Omar Elías Torrado Duarte², and Carlos Guillermo Vargas Beltrán³⁺

¹P Universidad Industrial de Santander, Atenea Educational Research Group of the Universidad Industrial de Santander

² Atenea Educational Research Group of the Universidad Industrial de Santander

³ Atenea Educational Research Group of the Universidad Industrial de Santander, Colombia, Human Resources Department, Unitrópico, Colombia

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to describe parents' participation in the Program of Sex Education and Construction of Citizenship, PESCC (Spanish acronym for Programa de Educación para la Sexualidad y Construcción de Ciudadanía) in Colombia, South America. This program involves the educational community in the institutional transformation with a human rights approach. This document includes guidelines for international educational policies related to the participation of parents in the Educational Institutions (EI's) and different theoretical positions about parental involvement in the transformation of education and the EI's where their children are enrolled; the policies, laws and regulations established in the Colombian educational system that take into account the participation of parents and the program of sex education and citizenship. Additionally it reports the methodological design used, which was action-research, and it shows the results of the study, which analyzes the level of parental involvement in the development of PESCC. Finally some conclusions are drawn about the importance and the need of parental involvement in the curriculum for improving the quality of education.

Keywords: Involvement, Parents, Curricular Modification, Colombia.

1. Introduction

The presence of the family as the first level of human socialization and its role in education has been referenced in various documents of international educational policy and it highlights the global consensus on the subject. The World Education Forum in Dakar[1] highlighted the importance of partnership between the parties interested in education as a strategy to improve the quality of education systems and it recognized that initial learning occurs from birth, emphasizing the family's responsibility in the children's social and cognitive development. In the Conference of the Americas on Education for All[2] for Latin America and the Caribbean, established the governments' commitment to encourage parental involvement in a learning process of shared responsibility, with a view to improving the conditions of educational services offered. In the Conference of Ministers of Education [3] education was recognized as a right and an obligation shared by individuals and diverse societal organizations, highlighting the need for sustained involvement of the different participants involved in the field of education.

Since the school is a "social ecosystem", i.e. a human community that works integrally in a dynamic of reciprocal relationships[4], it is expected that teachers, school administrators, students, parents, and other significant participants from the community will participate in the construction and implementation of the curricular proposal. There are five types of links between the family and the educational system: the first one, the relationship *family-education*, which comprises any type of relation between the two parties; the second one, *involvement of the family in education*, applicable at moments in which parents have the capacity to influence the development, execution and evaluation of their children's educational process; the third one, *family education*, or the application of supplementary educational programs for parents; the fourth one, the *family-school linkage*, which comprises the activities undertaken at home with a view to enhancing the

* Corresponding author. Tel: 6359963 – 6344000 ext. 1277.
E-mail address: atenea@uis.edu.co

children's learning, and the fifth one, the *parents' integration*, through financial or material contributions for strengthening the sustainability of the programs[5].

The Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education LLECE, (Spanish acronym for Laboratorio Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación) points out in its report on educational effectiveness and associated factors¹[6] that parental involvement in school activities acts as a factor associated to the students' performance and is directly associated to the students' academic performance and the teachers' level of motivation for carrying out actions aiming at teamwork between the family and the school. It is then expected that parents' active involvement will be directed towards the enrichment and contextualization of the educational and pedagogical proposal of the EI, the evaluation of the process developed and the promotion of student involvement within the family, thanks to its socializing function [7]. Parental involvement is important not only in the monitoring and control processes, but also in the upbringing and curricular structure processes[8], a concept that extends the parental role in the management of initiatives of change and the structuring of norms of coexistence and the Institutional Education Project, PEI, (Spanish acronym) of EI's[9].

Several studies point out that parental involvement promotes academic achievement and the improvement of the quality of public school systems. It has been demonstrated that the maintenance of a functional 15-minute contact between parents and children every day favors the development of academic skills and produces improvements in the students' academic and social performance and in the quality of communication between parents and EI's [10] and positive effects in the institutional and family context [11][12][13]. The aspects mentioned above highlight the importance of involving parents in the educational reforms [13], because they require collective capacity of the parties involved under an empathetic leadership, exercised from the school administration [10]. Schools where students, parents and teachers do not establish friendship, commitments and links between them, problems increase and achievements decrease [13].

In Colombia, Law 115 of 1992, which regulates primary, secondary and intermediate vocational education, considers the educational community as a responsible party of the education of students, their academic development and their progress in the acquisition of knowledge. For that reason EI's should provide spaces for parents to actively participate in the educational process included in the PEI [14]. The PEI is a document that includes the mission, vision, the principles of the school, the student profile, the necessary faculty and educational resources, regulations for teachers and students, and the management system. It must be characterized by being developed by all members of the educational community (enrolled students, parents, teachers, school administrators and graduates) and it must correspond to the students' context and be specific, achievable and measurable [14]. Decree 1860 of 1994 attributes the responsibility of compulsory education to the state, the society and the family. Parents must provide compulsory education for their children under closely scrutiny by the state, participate in the Parent-Teacher Associations, enquire about the educational process and institutional dynamics, ensure suitable education imparted to their children, and provide an environment conducive to learning in the home context. Additionally, these norms specify mandatory sex education, and they ratify the importance of incorporating the teaching of values and sex education in the PEI of each EI in the country. Consistent with this, it proposes education for citizenship, where citizenship competencies encourage each person to get involved in peaceful coexistence, to responsibly and constructively participate in democratic processes, and to respect and value plurality in their immediate context (the family), the community, their country, and/or other countries [14].

Taking the aforementioned legal norms as a basis, the MEN implemented the PESCC in 2006 with a view to strengthening basic competencies in students for making responsible, informed and autonomous decisions on their body, through the orientation of human, sexual and reproductive rights. For its implementation, the PESCC contemplates the use of *conducting threads*, which are *thematic axes that guide sex education*, that seek interaction with formal and informal learning and are articulated with the school curriculum and the community's pre-existing knowledge [15]. It also requires the creation of working groups made up of students, teachers, school administrators, parents and other significant members of the community in which the school is located. In Bucaramanga, Santander, the UIS' Atenea Educational Research Group implemented, through an agreement with the Municipal Education Secretariat, the PESCC in 25 EI's from 2008 to 2011. The purpose of this work is to describe parental involvement in this process.

¹Components of causal relationship with a certain outcome: it could be institutional or academic change (Programa de Promoción de la Reforma Educativa en América Latina y el Caribe, 2001).

2. Methodology

This study was conducted from a qualitative approach, through an action research design for generating a proposal for integrating the PESCC components. It involved getting to know each EI, identifying the nature of its population and analyzing its dynamic structures and their rationality in order to understand the ways of behaving and acting.

2.1. Population and Sample

The population consisted of the 53 existing public EI's of Bucaramanga during the project implementation. These EI's, which offered educational service in pre-school, elementary, secondary and vocational schools, served mostly students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and the number of students enrolled ranged between 332 and 6112 per educational institution. The sample was composed of the parents from the working groups of the 25 EI's in which the PESCC was implemented.

2.2. Collection and Validation of Information

For the collection of data, the techniques of document analysis, non-participant observation and video recordings were used. The documents subjected to revision were: the PEI, the behavior manual and the minutes of each meeting of the working groups. Non-participant observation made it possible to contemplate and record the behaviors, interactions and attitudes of parents and their proposals for enriching Institutional Diagnoses (ID) of the working groups. The video recording allowed collecting detailed visual and auditory information. As part of the data systematization process, progress reports were prepared for each EI, focusing the analysis on parents' principles of participation in the working groups. Validation of the information was performed through triangulation of the visit minutes, video recording and the recording of observations. Each educational institution was assigned a code number from 001 to 025.

3. Results

Table1: EI members' average attendance to PESCC work sessionsper EI during the years 2008-2011

Code assigned to the EI	Parents	Teachers*	Directors	Students	Others
001	1	3		2	1
002**	1	3	1	3	
003		3	2		1
004		2	1		
005		12	1		1
006		6	2		
007		10	2		
008		4	5	1	
009	8	2	1		
010		8	2		1
011		3			
012		3			
013		7	1		
014		1		3	
015		1		3	2
016		5	2		
017		1	1		
018		3	1	8	
019		5	2	2	2
020		3	1		
021		2	1	2	
022		7	2		
023		1	2	3	1
024**	2	4	2	7	
025		1			

* This category includes psychologists and counselorsfromEIs.

** EIs that included the participation of the whole education community in at least one of the working groups developed.

Of the 25 working groups formed (2008 – 2011) only 16% (4 EI's) showedparental involvement inat least one of the work sessions held, while teachers participated in 100% of the working groups studied. The

school administrators participated in 76% (19) of the 25 educational institutions. The students participated in 40% of the EI's (10), and health personnel, social workers and administrators participated in 28% of the EI's (7); the latter were categorized as *other participants*, as their participation is complementary for the curricular improvement of EI's. The participation of parents, teachers, administrators and students took part in only 8% of educational institutions (2) in at least one of the working groups. Likewise, 28% of the EI's (7) showed the participation of at least three members of the educational community (teachers, administrators and students), except for EI 001 where parents, teachers and students participated, but administrators did not participate, and EI 009, where parents, teachers and administrators participated but without the presence of students. Therefore, the members of the EI with the highest degree of participation were teachers and directors, in 76% of EI's (19). Table 1 presents the average attendance at the workshops in each EI, identifying the presence of the participants of the educational community in each EI.

Table 2: Institutional diagnosis and leading threads in EIs with and without parental involvement

Working groups	Code assigned to the EI	Institutional diagnosis	Leading threads selected by EIs
Without parents' participation	003	*The EI did not present a formal diagnosis that provides evidence of the methodology used for that purpose.	*Life project *Self appreciation *Identification, expression, and management of emotions
	004	There is a problem related to the equality and dignity of men and women's rights; it is reflected in the high rates of domestic violence, and it blocks the individual's development of such aspects as identity, emotion, as well their social, physical and cognitive aspects, i.e. all their potentialities	*Gender equity
	011	There are family and school life situations that involve the students' emotions and feelings.	*Identification, expression, and management of emotions
	016	Neglect by parents, making it necessary to inform parents about the students' duties and rights. Parents should be given the necessary guidelines for the proper education of their children. It is necessary to start a campaign against drug abuse and to raise awareness among students about the harm that drug use involves. Aggression by parents, suicide attempts and theft.	*Identification, expression, and management of emotions
	020	Low self-esteem and low willingness to work in the classroom. Lack of values and behavior patterns; lack of support from parents, low education of the family	* Self appreciation
	025	* Disrespect among students in classrooms and their environment, lack of consideration of the girls for their body Lack of a well-established, continuous sex education project in the institution. * There is not an appropriate sexual orientation in the teenagers' development.	*Self appreciation
With the participation of parents	001	High incidence of aggressiveness among students and situations of domestic violence resulting in low academic performance and lack of motivation towards the studies.	*Life project *Gender identity *Pacific, dialogue-based coexistence *Recognition of dignity.
	002	*Aggressiveness in relations between students *Involvement in sexual relations at an early age, with lack of suitable contraception methods * Situations of domestic violence	* Life project, * Self-appreciation, * Development of moral judgment.
	024	The EI does not have a clear ID: a poll was carried out, but the results were not shown, hampering the work of the group	No conducting thread was chosen

Of the 25 EI's, the school identified with code 009 showed the highest parental participation in the PESCC working groups, with a total of 13 participants in a single session. 12% (3) of the participating EIs had only the teachers- attendance. Table 2 summarizes the most significant aspects of the (ID) and the conducting threads that the working groups chose for addressing them across all the curriculum areas. IEs with and without the presence of parents in the working sessions were put in groups.

Table 2 shows that five of the EIs without parental involvement, (004, 011, 016, 020 and 025) presented in their ID some problems related to family dynamics. EI's 003 and 024 did not systematize the ID, although EI 024 showed parental participation, which can be related to the continuous rotation of teachers.

4. Discussion

Although in Bucaramanga two of the EI's with parental participation in the working groups developed a complete ID and established several conducting threads to work on the curriculum, there are no major differences between them and the working groups where only teachers and administrators were working. This can be attributed to low authentic participation of the other agents involved (including parents), who participated sporadically, so the performance of their EI cannot be attributed their participation. The above findings are consistent with the low rate of parental participation in planning the PEI in the EI's in some municipalities of Antioquia and the city of Sincelejo, Colombia. Likewise, it is reported that teachers feel that parents delegate much of the responsibility for upbringing their children, thus breaking the school-family relationship. This demonstrates that parental involvement is mediated by the educational expectations the family has about the child's life project. [15][16]. The Latin American Public Opinion Project found out that among 23 countries Colombia occupies the 18th position on parental participation in the different school activities, with a percentage of 19.9% of parents involved in their children's educational process. This same study shows that in countries with more active participation of parents, there is a direct relationship between the political commitment for promoting community participation and the rate of parental involvement in the educational process [17].

UNESCO has identified as obstacles in the family-school relationship, the parents' negative perception about school meetings in which teachers mention behavioral and academic problems of their children [5]. Another barrier is the poor or little rapport between the parents their children's teachers, as they perceive each other as independent actors in the education of the student [13]. In the case under study, the traditionalist approach, where the teacher thinks he has the exclusive right to give opinions and decide on the relevant aspects of the school dynamics, ignores the parents' democratic participation in the school dynamics; many of the meetings with the parents do not fit the current context of the families or their schedules. It is necessary for parents to know how they can be involved in finding solutions in schools, as they perceive that their participation is limited to receiving information about their children and the supply materials required for the educational process, without understanding the mechanisms affecting the development of the EI. From the teachers' perspective, there are common generalizations about the lack of civic values among students and the presence of many dysfunctional households, where parents do not take any responsibility for their children's education and shift it entirely to the EI's [18]. As an intervention strategy to promote effective institutional change, it has been suggested that the members of the educational community should take risks and be creative when submitting proposals for improvement, without accusations for them, fostering a favorable environment for truly democratic institutional change [16].

5. Conclusions

The results show that while parents have a high degree of responsibility in the education of the students, they have low participation in their children's school affairs, in comparison to the other members of the educational community, as they were absent from 84% of the work process developed in the implementation of the PESCC in the EI's. It is the teachers and school administrators who diagnose the problems and select the conducting threads that guide the PEI; nevertheless, a comprehensive view of the educational reality should involve parents in order to promote a culture of participation that involves the families in the education process, as the ID's of all participating EI's in Bucaramanga showed family problems and lack of concern about the education of children.

By promoting the participation of the entire school community and getting their initiatives materialized, it is possible to motivate the participants and increase their commitment because they perceive that their ideas and contributions are taken into account and actually contribute to institutional improvement. Thus parents

can effectively use their potentialities and experiences in the context of inclusive and democratic education. Finally, the parents' experiences, knowledge (formal or empirical) and proposals are central to contribute to a well-rounded education for the young. Their participation is essential in the formulation and assessment of educational policies. It is imperative to make them visible in the school dynamics.

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