

# TOWARD A LESS SCHOOL-CENTERED PERSPECTIVE OF THE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION

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This paper is a commentary on Boulanger's (2019) work entitled "Social Representations of parental engagement in poor context: Empty parents and Full Teachers." More particularly, my goal is to highlight some crucial aspects that are promoted by the author in order to move the view of the school-family-community partnerships toward a less school-centered perspective. Through a review of the analyses of representations and tensions between fullness and emptiness, the commentary aims to move forward the Boulanger's (2019) claim and to consider the interactional space between school and family from an ethnographic point of view.

The question of the school-family-community partnership constitutes a central issue and a topic of interest in different fields of research (psychology, sociology, and education, among other disciplines), often at the interface between them. In particular, the main aspect that various studies have considered is related to the value of parental participation: this is something largely accepted, although the difficulties in promoting and maintaining engagement are also clear.

The paper of Boulanger (2019) is focusing on this latter aspect, assuming as a starting point the centrality of understanding the disagreement between educators (specifically, the teachers) and parents. In fact, the author claims that, especially for families in poverty-related context, the "negative" representations of educators constitute a limit that has not been yet solved by the existing cognitivist-behaviorist models and theoretical typologies. Thus, the first merit of the Boulanger's (2019) paper is to open the issue of a criticism toward the static and inefficient ways through which research considers processes and mechanisms of representations of school parental engagement. It seems that, by focusing on school-related view (the educators' side), the paper calls for a less "school-centered" perspective. This is, in my opinion, a convincing point and, accordingly, I will try to highlight some aspects of the school-family-community partnership that have been promoted by the author in order to frame them within an ethnographic view. I will consider the analyses of representations and tensions between fullness and emptiness that have been proposed in the paper and I will provide further (partial) attempts to move forward the author's claim. From one side, my intention is to value the (multiple) merits of Boulanger's (2019) paper and, from the other side, to provide an extension of his ideas toward the promotion of the ethnographic approach in the educational context, as a way to sustain fruitful school-family relationships.

## PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT: REPRESENTATIONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS

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The issues of the perception of parents' engagement and the role of the environment are presented by Boulanger (2019) as crucial aspects for enabling the educators to situate the children's learning experience. The fact that the author affirms that "educators are partially able to consider parents' environment" is an invitation to reflect about possible strategies for addressing the existing barriers to school involvement and participation at various levels. We are already aware of the positive implications of an increased parental involvement in children's education. However, as achievement levels are not consistent across students, this disparity needs to be explained: in this respect, Boulanger's (2019) paper considers one of the variables that have been analyzed by other studies (namely, the social class and poverty-related context; for an example, cf. Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis & George, 2004) in order to propose a new look on the school's need for an active support of community and family. In fact, as these constituents have a role to play in the educational success of students, it is crucial to reach a clear understanding of what each other's role entails. Boulanger (2019) is helping us to consider one of these elements (the teachers' representation of parental involvement) in order to reframe the whole picture of the school-family-community relationships within a new dynamic system.

As previous studies have shown (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005; LaRocque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011), the consideration of the parental role concerns the beliefs of parents about what they should do in relation to the children's education, in order to imagine and anticipate how they might behave in relation to activities relevant to school success. Beliefs, attitudes and perceptions pertain to representations, one of the key terms in the work of Boulanger (2019): in fact, educator's representations of children and parents are important determinants of teachers' practices and affect the school-family-community relationships. However, mostly of the previous studies in the field of psychology and education have limitations in their measures and, by consequence, the range of parents' responses result constrained by the lack of understanding the content of teacher-parent-child relations. These representations need to take into account the dynamic interactions and the proximal and distal levels that constitute the parents' environment within the frame of school-family relationships. In fact, the parental engagement often remains *invisible* (as Boulanger (2019) states), restricted to the informal side of education and qualified as non-engagement. This point is particularly relevant because is connected to the idea of family involvement as investment in the education of their children, although demonstrated via participation in a hierarchy of activities performed exclusively at school. What is outside of the formal school frame is perceived as external and not pertinent, with the result of parents often dismissed because they are not viewed as actively involved in their child's education or knowledgeable of the usual school activities (Koonce & Harper, 2005; Overstreet, Devine, Bevans & Efreom, 2005).

With respect to this point, different evidences can be advanced in order to reduce the risk of overemphasizing the formal practices of engagement. The first situation concerns the case of the homework activities that involve parents and children within a range of different configurations outside the school frame. Apart studies that have measured the parental involvement in homework (for a review, cf. Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong & Jones, 2001), ethnographic research in the family context had the merit to illustrate how doing homework is an activity at the interface of family and school lives that requires strong parental involvement (Wingard & Forsberg, 2009; Pontecorvo, Liberati & Monaco, 2013) and confronts parents to contradictory constraints in terms of goals and resources, especially time. Although parents are interested and committed to the education of their children, their roles and efforts may not be as apparent for educators. This is exactly in

line with Boulanger's (2019) claim that teachers can be not able to recognize these specific activities (informal educational situations) as signs of parental involvement. On the other hand, educators' attitudes can influence how parents perceive schools interest in their families and their relations with the school. As highlighted by Arcidiacono and González-Martínez (2017), the ethnographic approach and the fine description of the educational interactions among people can produce benefit in a multidirectional way: instead of a categorization process in which objects and people are fixed or situated into classes under the impulse of beliefs, attitudes or social conventions, teachers could gain insights on how to better meet the needs of their students through a more precise knowledge of what parents and children do in informal practices of education.

Another relevant element discussed in the paper is connected to the condition of poverty that is invoked by Boulanger (2019) as a situation favoring the possibility of dichotomies in categorizing parents, for instance as good versus bad or engaged versus not engaged. It is true that the mismatch between economic classes often creates real or perceived conflictual situations. These types of relationships based on social differences are sometimes heightened when teachers refer to parents who are from diverse backgrounds from their own and can become challenging when we consider the critical implications for positive school-family interactions. Previous studies (Bélisle, 2006; Boulanger, Larose, Grenier, Saussez & Couturier, 2014) have shown that low social class parents expect schools to make discipline and to educate children's behavior. As reaction, teachers reply that this is a case of parental delegation of responsibilities to the school implying and sustaining discontinuity. Exactly for this reason, understanding the family environment can be a tool in dissuading educators from making erroneous assumptions. A need for reciprocity should involve a dynamic process in which teachers and parents exchange knowledge, values and perspectives of their different backgrounds. This should provide, at least, an opportunity to address areas of incompatibility between family and school.

## **TENSIONS BETWEEN FULLNESS AND EMPTINESS**

In Boulanger's (2019) view, density refers to full zones of the environment making sense for a person (e.g., the teacher). It is the case when educators face objects that make sense for them and that they invest in. On the other side, objects that do not make sense (e.g., the informal parental engagement) generate a feeling of emptiness of the zone. This tension between fullness and emptiness is systemic, but the question now is about the transition from what is unfamiliar to something familiar: how people can expand the concepts of fullness and emptiness in their systemic environments?

Boulanger (2019) proposes the social representation theory applied to school-family relationships in order answer the question. In the author's claim, the tensions between the concepts and the making familiar the unfamiliar recall the notions of assimilation and accommodation. Accordingly, a person can mobilize socio-cognitive structures to accommodate an object into his/her familiar environment, or can try to assimilate an empty object by modifications. The use of these notions let us to consider the Piagetian ideas about the process of adaptation, through which thinking is organized by logical structures that are gradually modified to become more powerful and integrative. For Piaget's (1926) this is supposed to happen through an auto-equilibration process that becomes active when a person encounters contradictions and try to overcome them. But this adaptation does not occur in a cognitive vacuum, free from the contextual aspects (Arcidiacono & Perret-Clermont, 2010). In

this sense, educators experiencing the tensions between fullness and emptiness have to canalize the interaction between the object (e.g., the presence of a parent) and the environment (e.g., the school structure) according to the emotional, social and contextual factors that intervene in the here-and-now. It is a step that allows to enter in a boundary zone (Konkola, 2001; Arcidiacono, 2013), the area of contact between two or more environments in which people are encouraged to share ideas and knowledge without prearranged routines or rigid patterns. Within this frame, an ethnographic perspective and an idiographic approach (Arcidiacono, 2015) can be helpful in considering social representations as starting points to promote new forms of interactions, especially through the analysis of verbal exchanges in educational contexts. Different studies promote this line of research: for example, in a work done by Cattaruzza, Iannaccone and Arcidiacono (2019; this Special Issue), the ethnographic approach is presented to foster positive changes in the inter-contextual balance between school and family. In fact, instead of being considered as “technicians” with a superficial and stereotypical way of participating to school activities, parents can play a very active role in constructing activities at school. This can contribute to construct an ecosystem in which teachers and parents are able to be open to the unfamiliar and to use the others’ resources. As consequence, the promotion of an ethnographic view can favor the possibility to consider the activities and the processes of regulation that characterize the actors’ interactions around school-family relationships. It is a perspective inviting to make a shift of the focus of analysis and to move from the representations to the observable elements of a situation. This type of approach seems to be adequate in considering the entire system of interactions and the space of action in which an activity is constructed and performed (Iannaccone & Arcidiacono, 2014). In this sense, a combination of perspectives should be useful to illustrate how the socio-cultural context impacts different interactions in educational environments, making visible the different positions, the (internal and external) voices, the meanings and the agencies that people endorse. As highlighted by Cattaruzza, Iannaccone and Arcidiacono (2019), this approach implies that within situations of complexity, often full of implicit meanings, it is necessary to understand to what extent the participants’ statements (educators or parents) cannot be adopted as the unique source of information, without the analysis of the activities and processes of regulation/negotiation that characterize the interactions around school-family relationships. Within this approach, researchers are called to adopt techniques of participant observation, by collecting verbal and nonverbal data during the social interactions across different contexts.

In the idea of combining perspectives, opening opportunities and, at the same time, offering a secure space of interactions, some adaptations, concessions and compromises are necessary: in this way, educators can provide positive feedbacks, can contribute to improve the parenting efficacy and can enforce more efficient educative strategies. These aspects have been highlighted by a recent study aiming at integrating family and school realities (Pirchio, Passiatore, Carrus, Maricchiolo, Taeschner & Arcidiacono, 2017). The research showed that open attitudes of parents toward the expectations of the school are relevant factors for a successful family-school relationship. In another study, Zazzera, Pontecorvo and Arcidiacono (2019) have indicated that experiences based on the combination of perspectives (and implying an ethnographic approach) can function as possible feed-backs in bringing novelty in the parental representations, intended not just as entities, but as cultural processes. However, most of the available data obtained by the existing studies refer to past experiences that are often very far from the actions performed during the investigation, allowing a partial and indirect reconstruction that is not specifically oriented to the real experienced situation. Iannaccone and Cattaruzza (2015) have highlighted that the distance from the activity

increases the likelihood of a static view of the representations elaborated through different surveys. By consequence, it is important to interpret the activities produced by the participants as forms of conversational interaction and elements of specific *interactional contexts*.

## CONCLUSION

As I have highlighted, unbalanced perspectives and inequalities are firstly built on discourses that are fixed on representations. A direct observation of the activities and a close attention to the conversational elements that are advanced during family-school exchanges are relevant to contextualize and to make visible the engagement of people. In this sense, there is a need to open new and concrete perspectives for orienting future pedagogical designs in order to improve the effectiveness of the relationships among parents, students and teachers. This need can be expressed as a necessity of re-framing and enlarging the borders and the spaces that constitute the environments of educators and parents. The possibility of a collaborative work based on activities that mobilize processual and dialogic dimensions of the school-family-community relationships should constitute the opportunity to invite people to activate processes of re-interpretation of their reciprocal interpersonal relations. This step should constitute a rupture making actors more aware of the possible alternative interactions within and outside the school, besides the usual and traditional ways and representations.

Last but not least, although there is no one best way for parental engagement, teachers and parents should learn not to fear others' involvement. This can come from building a mutual trust between educators and families, by addressing cultural, social, emotional and physical barriers to increase the parental involvement, especially in poor contexts. Teachers should strive to make engagement meaningful for parents and to enable them to grow in their ability to accompany their children to get the best education. In this sense, we need to assume a wider perspective and to sustain parental involvement as a process rather than a one-time event. To understand needs and opportunities that school and families serve can contribute to modify the actual structures within the school, in order to be able to assume a less school-centered perspective. As teachers' educators, we need to take into account these evidence and to ensure progresses already at the level of the initial training offered to teacher students at different levels. As the possibility to better situate the dynamic of school-family relationships can contribute to grasp teachers' representations of parents, we have to offer a professional training in which theories do not need to be prescriptive for the practice, but, on the contrary, should be in service of the existing teachers' competences (Kolher, Boissonnade, Padiglia, Meia & Arcidiacono, 2017). In this way, educators, parents and children will be able to identify their place within the educational system, as virtuous chess pieces of a suitable chessboard.

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